OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER

A TRIBUTE TO GREMLIN GRAPHICS

FOUNDER IAN STEWART LOOKS BACK ON THE HOUSE THAT MONTY MOLE BUILT

THE LEGACY OF SYSTEM SHOCK

WE REVISIT THE ORIGINAL GAMES AND NIGHTDIVE'S NEW UPDATE

THE MAKING OF SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE MEGA DRIVE CLASSIC AND ITS KNUCKLES-POWERED SEQUEL WITH SEGA'S TAKASHI IIZUKA

THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

YOUR ULTIMATE GUIDE TO MIKE SINGLETON'S MASTERPIECE

THE MAKING OF XENO CRISIS

BITMAP BUREAU FIRES UP ITS CHAOTIC TWIN-STICK SHOOTER

THE EVOLUTION OF MIDNIGHT CLUB

KEY DEVELOPERS RETURN TO ROCKSTAR'S PIMPED-UP STREET-RACING FRANCHISE

ALSO INSIDE

KALISTO ENTERTAINMENT
PRINCE OF PERSIA CLASSIC **HOMEBREW** MOON PATROL
AMERICAN GLADIATORS **PIPPIN ATMARK**

THE MAKING OF ROBOCOP 3

HOW FILM WOES SCUPPERED THIS AMBITIOUS AMIGA GEM

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE GREMLIN GRAPHICS GAME

DARRAN JONES

I was a goody two-shoes as a youngster, but *Jack The Nipper* let me do all the naughty things I could only dream of.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing:
Dead Space
Favourite game of all time:
OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast

TIM EMPEY

I recently bought The A500 Mini for my brother's birthday, of course I had to test it before I handed it over. Well, either that, or it was so I could get a go on *Super Cars II*…
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing:
Exoprimal
Favourite game of all time:
God Hand

NICK THORPE

I'm rather partial to *N2O*, a *Tempest*-style PlayStation shoot-'em-up with a soundtrack by The Crystal Method. *Deflektor* is great too.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing:
Tomb Raider: Legend
Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog

ANDY SALTER

Not exactly a game I played, but it was interesting to see Gremlin try to take on EA with the release of *Actua Soccer*.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding:
Kenshi Universal Wasteland Expansion Mod
Favourite game of all time:
Rome: Total War although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now.

RORY MILNE

Kids' comics are a staple of many British childhoods, and *Jack The Nipper* brings them to riotous life. As well as rewarding naughty pranks, it's just a great arcade adventure.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing:
Star Wars: Starfighter
Favourite game of all time:
Tempest

PAUL DRURY

From the 8-bit days, it's the brilliant *Bounder*. From its later releases, I have a very soft spot for *N2O*, which is basically Tony Crowther covering Jeff Minter – two of my heroes in one.
Expertise: Compton's classic penny pushers
Currently playing:
Ray'z Arcade Chronology
Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space

GRAEME MASON

Jack The Nipper, such fun causing havoc with a pea-shooter and superglue!
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing:
The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim
Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4

ANDREW FISHER

West Bank (C64) – inspired by the arcade game *Bank Panic*, it's a great test of reactions.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *Space Taxi*
Favourite game of all time:
Wizball

PAUL ROSE

I've got a bit of a soft spot for *Bounder*. The C64 version though. The lack of colour makes it next to unplayable on the Speccy.
Expertise: Winging' it
Currently playing:
The Legend Of Zelda: Tears Of The Kingdom
Favourite game of all time:
Half-Life 2

LOADING...

I can still remember the first time I played *Sonic 3*. I'd visited my friend Brady's house and he had it on his Mega Drive and eagerly showed it to me. I remember being impressed by its slick visuals and excellent music, but completely missed its *Sonic & Knuckles* sequel, despite seeing adverts for it at the time.

It's great then to hear about the creation of both games via Takashi Iizuka as it's a pair of *Sonic* classics that I only recently got seriously stuck into thanks to *Sonic Origins*. Speaking of which, Nick's taken time from writing our main feature to list all the Game Gear games that are included in the new DLC update for *Sonic Origins*.

If going fast isn't your thing there's plenty more to enjoy this issue. We quiz Ian Stewart about the games of Gremlin Graphics, look at the impact of *System Shock* and its impressive new remaster and chat to Mike Tucker about the excellent *Xeno Crisis*. We also explore Mike Singleton's *The Lords Of Midnight*, take Rockstar's *Midnight Club* series for a spin, go behind the scenes of the excellent *RoboCop 3* and much more besides.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

CONTENTS

>> Load 249 Breathing new life into classic games

RETRO RADAR

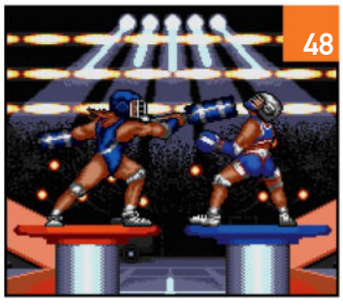
6 **Main News**
Read about the retro-fuelled games heading to Nintendo's Switch

8 **Iain Lee**
Find out what happened when Iain attended a retro event and met the one and only Kevin Toms

10 **Mr Biffo**
Do you have a thing for the Amiga CD32? Paul does, but only a little bit

12 **A Moment With**
Dr Alan Meades talks to us about his new book celebrating British arcades

14 **Back To The Noughties**
Our intrepid time traveller has reached the end of 2006. What will he find there?



REVIVALS

16 **Zenji**
Nope, we've not heard of it either, but Nick seems to like it

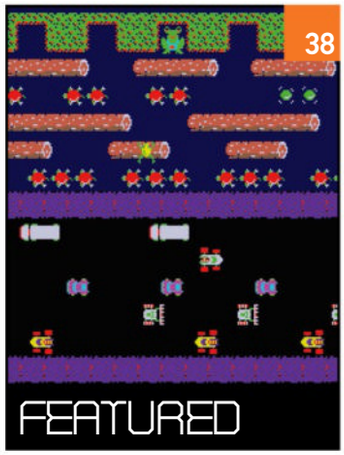
30 **Moon Patrol**
Darran recalls his first time encountering Irem's arcade classic

48 **American Gladiators**
We all knew about Nick's obsession with Sonic. Here's a new one

74 **Fade To Black**
Darran explains why *Flashback*'s sequel didn't wow him on release

92 **Roommania #203**
Quite possibly the most Nick game we've ever featured in the mag

112 **Prince Of Persia Classic**
Darran revisits a game he reviewed in this very magazine. God, he feels old!



38 **Retro Gamer's Favourite... Frogs**
You'll be hopping mad if you miss Nick's fantastic tribute to videogames' greatest frogs. Come on, hop to it!

50 **The Unconverted**
Martyn Carroll laments the fact that *Planet Harriers* never made it outside of arcades. Century's *Hero*? Not so much

58 **Retro Inspired: Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise Of The Dragons**
Raymond Teo on updating the classic side-scrolling beat-'em-up series by adding roguelike mechanics

66 **Hardware Heaven: Pippin Atmark**
Meet the failed experiment Apple and Bandai happily forget existed

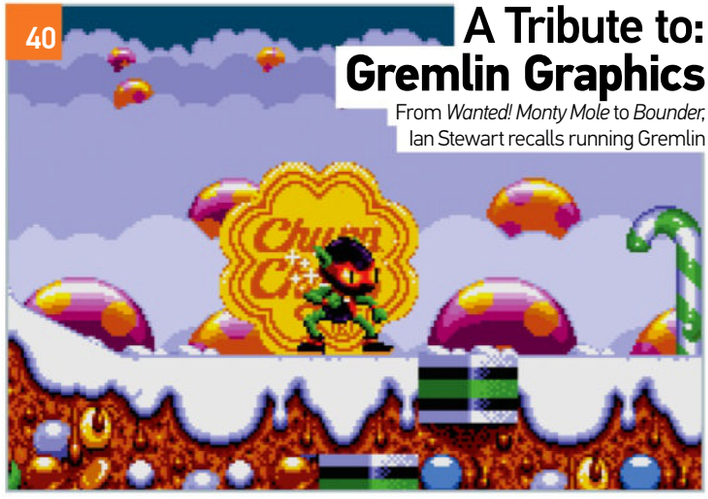
68 **Studio Profile: Kalisto Entertainment**
New freelancer Guy Miquel-Albert goes behind the scenes of this popular French development studio

76 **The Legacy Of: System Shock**
Find out why *System Shock* became such an important PC game and why it's being updated for today's gamers

84 **Peripheral Vision: Dreamcast Mouse**
Did you have one of these Dreamcast peripherals? Apparently it's great for playing *Outtrigger*

86 **The Evolution Of: Midnight Club**
Rory Milne talks to two of the designers behind Rockstar's popular racing game series that started life on Sony's PS2

The Making Of: Sonic The Hedgehog 3 and Sonic & Knuckles
Takashi Iizuka talks to us about creating Sonic's third adventure and its Lock-On-powered quasi sequel



A Tribute to: Gremlin Graphics
From *Wanted! Monty Mole* to *Bounder*, Ian Stewart recalls running Gremlin

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32

Ultimate Guide: The Lords Of Midnight

Martyn Carroll returns to Mike Singleton's ambitious 8-bit masterpiece

60

The Making Of: RoboCop 3

REVIEWS

94 Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise Of The Dragons
96 Ray'z Arcade Chronology
96 Operation Wolf Returns: First Mission VR
96 Gimmick! Special Edition
96 Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

ESSENTIALS

28 **Subscriptions**
More incredible than witnessing Sega's new Lock-On cartridge

98 **Homebrew**
What's been happening in this month's scene? Andrew Fisher has the answers

102 **Hot Topic: Gotta Go Fast**
Nick blackmails the team into talking about some hedgehog called Sonic

104 **Collector's Corner**
This month's husband and wife team use bundles to build their collection

106 **My Retro Life**
Graeme Mason explains how he created his debut Spectrum book

108 **Mailbag**
More lovely letters from you. We do enjoy reading them

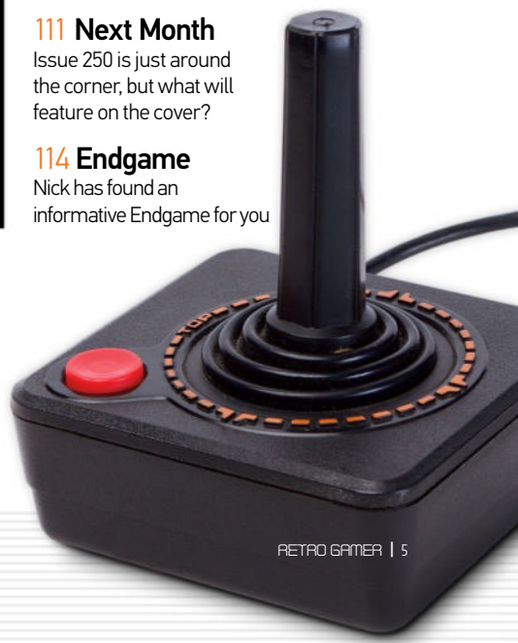
111 **Next Month**
Issue 250 is just around the corner, but what will feature on the cover?

114 **Endgame**
Nick has found an informative Endgame for you

52

The Making Of: Xeno Crisis

Mike Tucker on the creation of Bitmap Bureau's twin-stick Mega Drive blaster



DIRECT HITS

Retro-focussed games head to Nintendo's Switch

» [Switch] Fans of local multiplayer gaming will be right at home with *Super Mario Bros Wonder*.

CONTENTS

6 DIRECT HITS
Read about the many great games from Nintendo's latest Direct show

8 IAIN LEE
Find out what happened when Iain decided to attend a nearby retro event

10 MR BIFFO
Paul recalls the forgotten consoles that he got to experience while working on Digitizer

12 A MOMENT WITH
Paul Drury chats to Dr Alan Meades about his fascinating book that documents classic arcades

14 BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES
Nick returns to his nomadic life as a time traveller and finds out what went down in December 2006

If there's one thing we've learned in the last few years, it's that you should always watch a Nintendo Direct. The shows have been a big success for Nintendo and they're routinely used to reveal new games or give gamers an in-depth look at titles that they can expect to play soon. Nintendo's most-recent show took place on 21 June and featured a varied selection of games, but no news of the long-rumoured Switch 2 that so many fans want. Remakes and remasters have become a bread-and-butter staple of Nintendo's Switch and several interesting offerings were announced. The biggest by far was a brand-new remake of the SNES Holy Grail *Super Mario RPG*. It looks absolutely superb with completely overhauled visuals, while the game's music is being revisited by Yoko Shimomura who composed the original soundtrack.

» [Switch] The original SNES game is very costly nowadays, so this remake is welcome news.

Super Mario RPG wasn't the only RPG to receive an update as a remake of *Star Ocean 2* is on the way and combines 3D visuals with the distinctive 2D-HD visuals that appear in games like *Octopath Traveler*. It's heading to all systems and, like *Super Mario RPG*, is planned for a November release. Another remaster heading to all systems is Konami's *Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection Vol.1*, which will include *Metal Gear Solid 1*, *2* and *3*, the original *Metal Gear* MSX games as well as the NES games, including *Snake's Revenge*. Finally, a remaster of *Luigi's Mansion 2* was announced, which last appeared on Nintendo's 3DS, and Nintendo also stealthily dropped HD remasters of *Pikmin 1* and *2*. Both titles are available to enjoy right now with a physical set of the two games being planned for later in the year.

The new HD updates of the first two *Pikmin* games made a lot of sense when you consider the Direct's focus on *Pikmin 4*, which will be available by the time you read this. You can expect a review in our 250th issue, but it's looking like another enjoyable addition to the series.

> "Nintendo's Switch may well be in its twilight years now, but it's clearly going out with a bang"

Nintendo also used its Direct to announce several new games and virtually all of them will be available this year. The only title planned for 2024 is a new game starring Princess Peach. Peach hasn't starred in her own game since 2005's *Super Princess Peach*, so we're interested to see what direction Nintendo will take with the new, currently untitled game.

The new *Peach* game may be a while away, but Nintendo has several big hitters to kill time while you wait. *WarioWare: Move It!* is due November and sounds like

» [Switch] *Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection Vol.1* is looking like an essential purchase for Snake fans.

» [Switch] What's the bet that the original *Luigi's Mansion* will eventually make its way to Switch as well?

a spiritual successor to the Wii's *WarioWare: Smooth Moves*. Over 200 minigames will be included, with many of them focussing on using two controllers. A second *Detective Pikachu* game is also on the way and will drop in October. The mystery-based sequel was first announced back in 2019, so it will be interesting to see what enhancements it offers over the original 3DS adventure.

The biggest news of the show by far (at least for us) was the confirmation of a brand-new 2D *Mario* game which had been rumoured beforehand alongside a remake of *Chrono Trigger* (which remains a rumour). Like *Detective Pikachu 2*, *Super Mario Bros Wonder* is due October and looks like it's going to be tremendous fun. It features a very distinctive aesthetic which allows for some tremendous expressions on Mario and the rest of the team and the levels and abilities we've seen so far look really inventive, including a new elephant-themed power-up. There also seems to be a focus on combo-based gameplay, so it will be interesting to see how integral to the game that ends up being. We're also keen to see more of the Wonder Flower, a new mechanic which will alter aspects of the game whenever it is collected. Like more-recent *Super Mario Bros* games there will be a focus on multiplayer, with Luigi, Peach and Daisy being just a few of the playable characters available.

» [Switch] We enjoyed *Super Princess Peach*, so we'll certainly be keeping an eye on this.

» [Switch] With this and *Super Mario Bros Wonder*, it's certainly a good time for classic platformers.

Other highlights of the Direct focussed on games that would mainly be appearing across all formats and included more news on the incoming *Sonic Superstars*, which is being co-developed with Arzest, a studio cofounded by Sonic's co-creator Naoto Ohshima. It looks to be a modernisation of the classic Mega Drive *Sonic* games, so we're interested to see if it will be able to better *Sonic Mania*. Other games included *Penny's Big Breakaway*, a 3D platformer by the team that made *Sonic Mania* and *Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince* from Square, which is currently looking like a Switch exclusive.

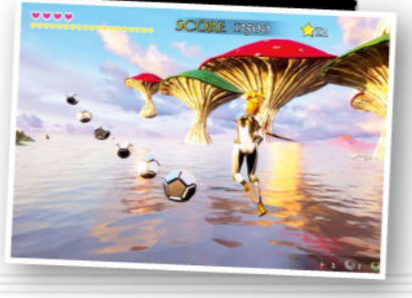
Nintendo's Switch may well be in its twilight years now, but it's clearly going out with a bang. It's a little concerning that Nintendo seems to be cramming most of these titles into a two-month window, but at least it means gamers are going to have plenty of choice by the year's end.

PERSONA GOES BIG

Although Microsoft's Showcase event was largely focussed on new IP, it did announce its *Fable* remake and revealed that the latest *Forza Motorsport* would drop in October. Both games will appear on Game Pass and they'll be eventually joined by *Persona 3 Reload*, a remake that will arrive in 2024. *Persona 5 Tactica* will also debut on Game Pass and looks to be a *Fire Emblem*-styled strategy game, which makes Darran very happy indeed.

AIR TWISTER UPGRADES

The latest game from Yu Suzuki is finally due to appear on other systems after starting life on Apple Arcade. *Air Twister* is an entertaining into-the-screen shooter that feels like a spiritual successor to *Space Harrier* and features a princess who rides a giant swan. It also has a truly bonkers soundtrack that sounds like a missing Queen album and will hopefully include all the additional upgrades found in the Apple Arcade release.



Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Nowhere man

The world of retro gaming can be very lonely. Modern gaming is great. You can pop online and play a round of *Walkabout Mini Golf* or *Call Of Duty* with any number of friends. Sadly, my BBC or GameCube can't do that. OK, I know you technically CAN get the GameCube online, but stop being pedantic.

I'm a member of a Dragon 32 Facebook group. I don't contribute, instead choosing to sit back and read posts about processors and clocks and loads of other stuff I have absolutely zero understanding of. However, whilst on there an ad popped up for RetCon – an event celebrating the world of retro that was only 40 minutes away from me. Some people may find it hard to believe but beneath this rather brash exterior I am an incredibly shy man. The thought of going to an event like this on my own fills me with dread. I hummed and hawed about going and decided I wouldn't. Then I saw a tweet from a guy called Matthew Harold. He was going to be there and would be displaying a BBC that could connect with other gamers via a ham radio setup. That totally swung it for me. I went.

I'm so glad I did. Magic happened that day. I met up with Matthew and he very graciously explained to me how the system worked. It was lovely just having a nerdy chat with this guy who explained everything and answered my rather dumb questions.

I bumped into Retro Faith, she of this **RG** parish. We'd met on Twitch a lot over the last couple of years and seeing her in the flesh was a real joy. The main thing I did was sit and watch some talks by absolute legends. I caught the end of the Oliver twins. Can I let you into a secret? It never occurred to me, and this will sound silly, that they would be actual twins. I know, I know. Hang my head in shame. I just thought it was a cool nickname for them.

My favourite talk was Kevin Toms about *Football Manager*. This was not a game I ever played but of course I grew up seeing his beardy face on the cover of those games when I went round to friend's houses or was perusing the tapes in Boots. He explained why he put his face on there – we knew what pop stars and movie actors looked like, why not game designers? And his plan worked. I got a real rush listening to him.

I bumped into him a bit later. He was sitting on his own and I just had to go and say something. Unfortunately, shy me kicked in. Me, "Hey Kevin, I really enjoyed your talk." Kevin, "Thanks." End of conversation.

I didn't talk to too many people, but those I did were absolutely lovely. A very kind guy came up and told me how my Twitch streams had helped him through lockdown. Stuff like that is really humbling. I am so glad I went. It was a very powerful and moving experience. I am totally going back next year.

"The main thing I did was sit and watch some talks by absolute legends"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000

Forgotten systems

One of the unexpected positive consequences of accidentally becoming a games journalist during the Nineties – arguably the most exciting time in gaming ever – was getting to play everything. It came with the territory that we'd either be given, or be bought, review hardware.

Not just the heavy-hitters, of course, but the ones that got away. The almost-rans, who made a play for glory. Those games systems that promised so much, and fizzled away with barely a sputter. Had I been just a punter, like most of Digitiser's readers, I doubtless would've stuck with my Mega Drive, Game Boy and Super NES, and looked upon the 3DO, the Jaguar and CD32 with the disdain that they maybe semi-deserved. I say only semi-deserved, because even the worst systems had things to recommend them.

I don't recall us ever actually being given a Jaguar review machine, but I believe Atari loaned one to us – which then had to be given back when the company choked on its own misfortune. Though it had few must-play games during its brief existence, the Jaguar was so clearly a powerful machine that who knows what it could've achieved, if there'd been an incentive for more studios to develop for it? *Alien Vs Predator* was obviously the must-play title, with *Tempest 2000* a close second. Go back to either now, and the untapped potential of the system is self-evident.

The 3DO I remember being extremely excited about. I'm not sure why looking back, but whatever message it was selling had certainly chimed with me. Ironically, its best games – *Star Control 2*, *Cannon Fodder*, *Out Of This World* – were ports, and didn't stretch the hardware. Nevertheless, *Need For Speed*, *Road Rash*, *Return Fire*, *Space Hulk: Vengeance Of The Blood Angels*, all demonstrated the huge potential for a second generation of 3DO games that never really materialised.

Admittedly, there was never much about the CD32 to get excited about. It always had a whiff of desperation about it – a panicked last roll of the Amiga dice. It had very few exclusives, it felt cheaply put together, the controller was a back-to-front lump of rattly nonsense, and yet… there was still that frisson of playing something new. The buzz of hope.

Any time I laid hands on a new system there was always the chance that this was maybe, possibly, perhaps, the next big thing. So it was also with the CD-i, the Nokia N-Gage, the Virtual Boy, the Ouya, Gizmondo, Vita and countless others. They were all punching above their weight.

I honestly don't think there's any such thing as a bad games machine. With the right level of support, the right timing, or the right luck, any one of them could've been a contender. Maybe that's not the case now we're in an era where the hardware companies are behemoths. There's no room for anyone smaller to sweep in and upset the status quo. And, frankly, the games industry is so much less interesting as a result.

> "Even the worst systems had things to recommend them"

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» You can experience lovingly recreated Herne Bay arcades, with Alan as virtual tour guide, at arcadebritannia.com

» Author Dr Alan Meades is always interested in talking to people about arcades. You'll be able to contact him at alan.meades@canterbury.ac.uk

Arcade Britannia

Author Dr Alan Meades tells Paul Drury all about the beautiful British arcade

> "British arcades were as much a space for the old dears playing bingo, the pinball or fruit machine fans, or families on penny pushers, as my generation playing videogames"
>
> **DR ALAN MEADES**

Ever wondered about the roots of our beloved arcades? Dr Alan Meades, principal lecturer in game design at Canterbury Christ Church University, has written a comprehensive, entertaining and accessible book, investigating their long history, their place in British society and, of course, the myriad of games which populated them.

Was the motivation for writing the book a misspent youth playing *Out Run* in arcades, Alan?
I grew up in the English seaside resort of Broadstairs. There was a great little arcade by the beach that became my hangout for much of my childhood and adolescence, and then there was the massive arcades at Margate and Ramsgate a few miles either way. I grew up with a great love of arcades and arcade games but it wasn't until I finished my PhD, where I spent a few years alongside hackers, glitchers and modders on the Xbox scene, that I realised there was a whole untold history of the origins and development of the British arcade to be told.

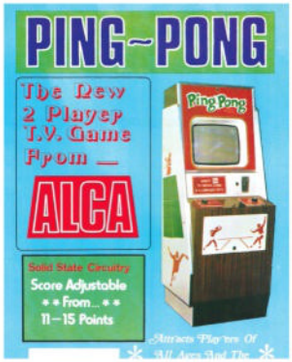
Why is the arcade something worthy of study?
I think that the test of something being worthy of study is how big an influence it has upon people and culture – how big a mark it leaves on your soul. For me, the arcade was absolutely intrinsic to my relationship with technology, games and other game players and it has influenced how I've grown up and see the world – I now run a games design degree, for instance. I've met so many people that say similar things.

Our readers probably associate 'the arcade' as the place they went to in the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties to play videogames but British arcades have a much longer history than that, don't they?
The amusement arcade can be directly linked to the travelling fairgrounds that were common across the country, as the showmen who ran them always kept a look out for novel entertainment technologies. In the late-1800s, coin-operated machines became popular including amusements and gambling devices, and showmen incorporated them into their travelling fairs. In the off-season months, showmen would rent buildings and workshops where they'd store and fix their amusements and they'd welcome visitors inside to pay and play the machines. Some showmen decided to keep these 'gaff shops' open permanently and high-traffic entertainment areas and seaside resorts were perfect

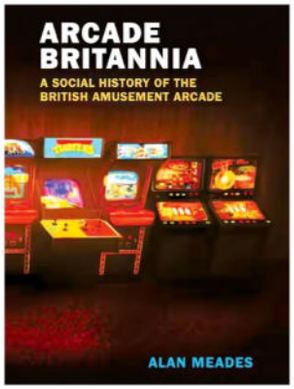
» Arcades existed long before videogames arrived, as this pre-WWII photo of Merrie England arcade in Ramsgate proves.

THE ORIGINS OF THE BRITISH ARCADE CAN BE FOUND IN THE TRAVELLING FAIRS THAT BROUGHT ENTERTAINMENT AND TRADE TO COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY FROM THE 13TH CENTURY ONWARDS.
SHOWPEOPLE SPECIALISING IN DEVELOPING AND RUNNING ENTERTAINMENT TECHNOLOGY THAT THE PUBLIC WOULD ENJOY.
FROM CAROUSELS TO DART THROWING
HOOP TOSSING TO COIN-OPERATED MACHINES
SPORTS ARCADE
ADMISSION FREE
AS COIN-OP MACHINES BECAME COMMONPLACE IN THE 1880'S, SHOWPEOPLE LEARNED ALL ABOUT THEM. SOME BUILT UP LARGE COLLECTIONS OF COIN-OP MACHINES, AND IN THE WINTER WHEN THERE WERE FEWER FAIRS, THEY MADE THEIR MACHINES AVAILABLE IN 'GAFF SHOPS' WHILE THEY MADE REPAIRS.
WEMBLEY
AND THIS HERALDED THE BIRTH OF THE AMUSEMENT ARCADE IN BRITAIN!

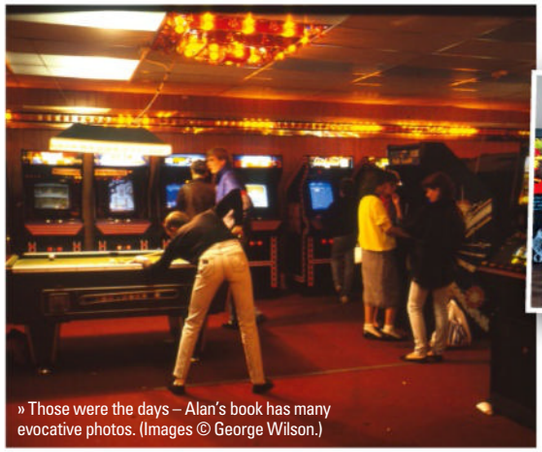
» Alan took the unusual route of producing a comic to reach out to the arcade community. And it worked!



» The very first coin-operated videogame produced in the UK was ALCA's *Ping-Pong*, a knock off of Atari's *Pong*. How very British.



» Alan's fascinating book is a great read for anyone interested in arcades, videogames and social history.



» Those were the days – Alan's book has many evocative photos. (Images © George Wilson.)

» *Arcade Britannia* was part of this year's London Design Biennale at Somerset House and included an interactive arcade inside an Electrocoin *Xenon* arcade cabinet.

for them. After the First World War, many travelling showmen decided to set up arcades, and this accelerated after the Second World War as fairgrounds were systematically closed down during urban regeneration.

You talk about the 'mythic arcade' in your book. What is it and how is it different to what we had in the UK?

The mythic arcade is that, the imaginary, stereotypical, North American influenced arcade idea: neon, videogames, adolescent boys, pop music. It's a strange mix of *Tron*, *The Last Starfighter*, and almost every retro videogame compilation, and is probably best seen in *Stranger Things*' Palace Arcade. It has become the dominant way of thinking and talking about arcades, and it steamrollers all over the memories of actual arcades, with all their distinct national differences. My British childhood arcades were as much a space for the old dears playing bingo, the pinball or fruit machine fans, or indeed the families on penny pushers, as my generation playing videogames.

You have interviewed many people from this often-demonised industry for your book. Was it hard to get them to trust you and talk?

It was slow going at first, simply because arcade owners and people in the industry had often been treated poorly by journalists who misrepresented them or went for the easy stories. So instead of phoning or emailing people, I produced comics that explained what I thought [about arcades], what I wanted to know, and which illustrated some of the great stories I'd already heard. I printed loads of these comics and gave them to anyone I could. After doing this for a year or two, I got a phone call from a chap called Phil Silver who is high up in the British Amusement Trade Body Organisation (BACTA), who said that he'd seen the comic and thought that BACTA's members, who make up almost all arcades in Britain, would be interested in talking. He gave me a list of names and numbers and that was where it all began.

Your book is being published by MIT Press. Will our readers enjoy it even if they are not doing a PhD?

MIT Press might be an academic publisher, but they really don't like boring books! It's written in an engaging way, and I've spent a huge amount of time working through the archives, interviewing people, and finding the most interesting and important stories. If you've ever wondered about how arcades came to be, about the people who brokered the deals that meant we got to play the games we played, and if the arcade is stamped on your very soul – then it's a book for you. ✱

You can buy *Arcade Britannia* from the MIT Press website or Amazon for £24.99. Make sure you also visit arcadebritannia.com where you can take a virtual guided tour of two accurately recreated arcades.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

DECEMBER 2006 – The new generation of consoles continues to gather momentum as the Wii goes worldwide and the Xbox 360 gets into gear. Nick Thorpe hops into his trusty time machine to bring you all the exciting action from this heavyweight holiday season

» Excited German gamers queue up to buy Wii consoles on launch day.

NEWS DECEMBER 2006

Between 2-12 December, the bodies of Tania Nicol, Gemma Adams, Anneli Alderton, Annette Nicholls and Paula Clennell were found in the Ipswich area. On 19 December, forklift driver Steve Wright was charged with murdering the five women, all of whom were sex workers. He was convicted at trial in 2008 and sentenced to a whole life tariff, and was later arrested in 2021 on suspicion of the 1999 murder of Victoria Hall.

Stars In Their Eyes concluded its 16-year run on ITV on 23 December, hosted by Cat Deeley who had taken over from Matthew Kelly in 2004. The show's future was reported to be under consideration in the summer, but an ITV spokesperson had denied that the show would be axed. The final show was a celebrity special, won by BBC Radio 2 presenter Mark Radcliffe performing as Shane McGowan of The Pogues.

On 30 December, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was executed by hanging, having been convicted of crimes against humanity by the Iraqi High Tribunal. The occasion was marked with controversy – Saudi Arabia criticised the Iraqi government for proceeding with the execution during an Islamic holy day, and footage of the execution soon appeared online.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM DECEMBER 2006

The Wii launched in Japan, Europe and Australia this month and got off to a very strong start. Japanese customers snapped up 371,936 consoles in the system's first two days on sale, with *Wii Sports* being the most popular game with 176,880 copies sold. Nintendo announced that the Wii had sold out after just two days in Europe, setting a new record for the region's fastest-selling console with 325,000 sales. *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess* shifted 240,000 copies, making it the region's most-popular game. 32,901 Wii consoles were sold in the first four days in Australia, narrowly beating the national record of 30,000 set by the Xbox 360 earlier in 2006.

The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess unsurprisingly took the top honours critically. Giving the game 9/10, *Edge* felt that Nintendo had attempted to create the definitive *Zelda* game, and that "the results not only display most of the strengths of previous games, but also provide pitch-perfect cast studies of their occasional flaws", with examples including "some familiar padding". The game scored 97% in *Nintendo: The Official Magazine*, which praised the "hardcore" difficulty level, whereas the 9.5/10 review in *nRevolution* claimed that it "offers as much to newcomers as it does long-time fans" – a point *games™* echoed in its 9/10 review.

Pack-in game *Wii Sports* received a mixed reception, with *ONM*'s 90% review praising it as a demonstration of the Wii technology, and *games™* giving it 6/10 because of a lack of substance. The game also scored 7.0/10 in *nRevolution* and 7/10 in *Edge*. Other notable Wii releases included the motion-controlled party package *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz* (8.4/10 *nRev*, 81% *ONM*, 7/10 *Edge*, 7/10 *games™*) and the

» [Wii] Magazines weren't impressed by *Wii Sports*, but families loved it.

heavily hyped but underwhelming first-person shooter *Red Steel* (91% *ONM*, 6.1/10 *nRev*, 5/10 *Edge*, 5/10 *games™*).

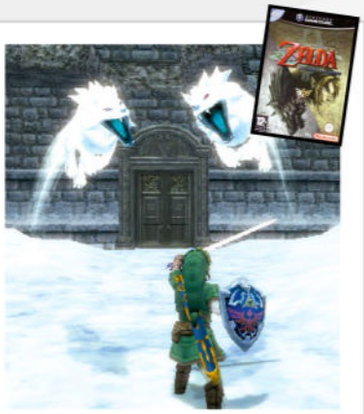
If Nintendo's low-powered, family friendly vision of the future didn't entice you, *Gears Of War* on the Xbox 360 likely did. The game scored 10/10 in *X-360* and 9/10 in *games™*, with the latter saying that it "invigorates tactical shooting in the same way *Resident Evil 4* did survival horror" and claiming that its co-operative play "could finally usurp Master Chief as the king of Xbox Live". It also scored 9/10 in the *Official Xbox 360 Magazine*, and though *Edge* complained of an "uninspiring story arc" and a "strikingly anticlimactic finale", it was still sufficiently impressed to give the game 8/10.

Anyone sticking with the PS2 had some fine games to keep them occupied. Rockstar shone a light on the ugly reality of secondary school life with *Canis Canem Edit*, formerly known as *Bully*. *Edge* said that it was "utterly relentless in its provision of new activities and distractions to the point that it's hard not to become absorbed", giving it 8/10. *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* felt that "in almost every way, this is an anti-bullying game" and gave it 9/10. It also scored 8/10 in *games™* and 87% in *Play*. The minigame-laden theme park sim *Thrillville* also scored well, earning 8/10 from *Official PS2* and 82% from *Play*, which felt it to be "one of the most diverse games on PS2".

» [PSP] A private portable retreat into the Eighties via *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories* does sound like a pretty good time.

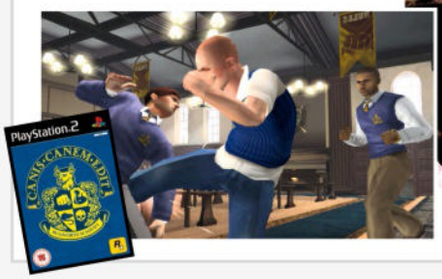
PSP owners had plenty to enjoy too. Shooter *Killzone Liberation* opted for an overhead view rather than the first-person perspective of its PS2 progenitor, and scored 9/10 in *Official PS2*, 83% in *Play*, 7/10 in *games™* and 7/10 in *Edge*. Open-world crime sequel *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories* earned 10/10 from *Official PS2*, 97% in *Go Play*, 96% in *Play*, 8/10 in *games™* and 7/10 in *Edge*. The DS suffered a lack of focus, likely due to the Wii launch, with Grasshopper's action RPG *Contact* earning 5/10 in *games™* and 82% in *ONM*.

Sequels were naturally big business during the holiday season, with publishers banking on the brand power of their established franchises to bolster their coffers, usually with multiplatform releases. New entries in successful series that managed to please the critics included *Call Of Duty 3*, *FIFA 07*, *Guitar Hero II*, *Need For Speed: Carbon*, *Pro Evolution Soccer 6*, *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Tony Hawk's Project 8*. PC players specifically got *Battlefield 2142* and *Medieval II: Total War* too.



» [GameCube] It's easy to forget that you didn't need to buy a Wii to play *Twilight Princess*.

Next month, we begin a year that will bring us *Assassin's Creed*, *BioShock*, *Crysis*, *Portal* and *Super Mario Galaxy* – yes, it's time for 2007.



» [PS2] Nick's secondary school was knocked down a few years ago. No sadness was experienced.

» [Xbox 360] *Gears Of War* was very impressive, and a key release in the Brown Age of gaming.

CHARTS

DECEMBER 2006

XBOX 360

1 – **Pro Evolution Soccer 6** (Konami)
2 – **FIFA 07** (EA)
3 – **Splinter Cell: Double Agent** (Ubisoft)
4 – **Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07** (EA)
5 – **Saints Row** (THQ)

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – **Pro Evolution Soccer 6** (Konami)
2 – **Need For Speed: Carbon** (EA)
3 – **Canis Canem Edit** (Rockstar)
4 – **FIFA 07** (EA)
5 – **Scarface: The World Is Yours** (Vivendi)

PC

1 – **Football Manager 2007** (Sega)
2 – **Warhammer 40,000 Dawn Of War: Dark Crusade** (THQ)
3 – **The Sims 2: Pets** (EA)
4 – **Neverwinter Nights 2** (Atari)
5 – **Battlefield 2142** (EA)

MUSIC

1 – **A Moment Like This** (Leona Lewis)
2 – **Patience** (Take That)
3 – **Sorry's Not Good Enough** (McFly)
4 – **I Think We're Alone Now** (Girls Aloud)
5 – **Truly Madly Deeply** (Cascada)

THIS MONTH IN...

Play

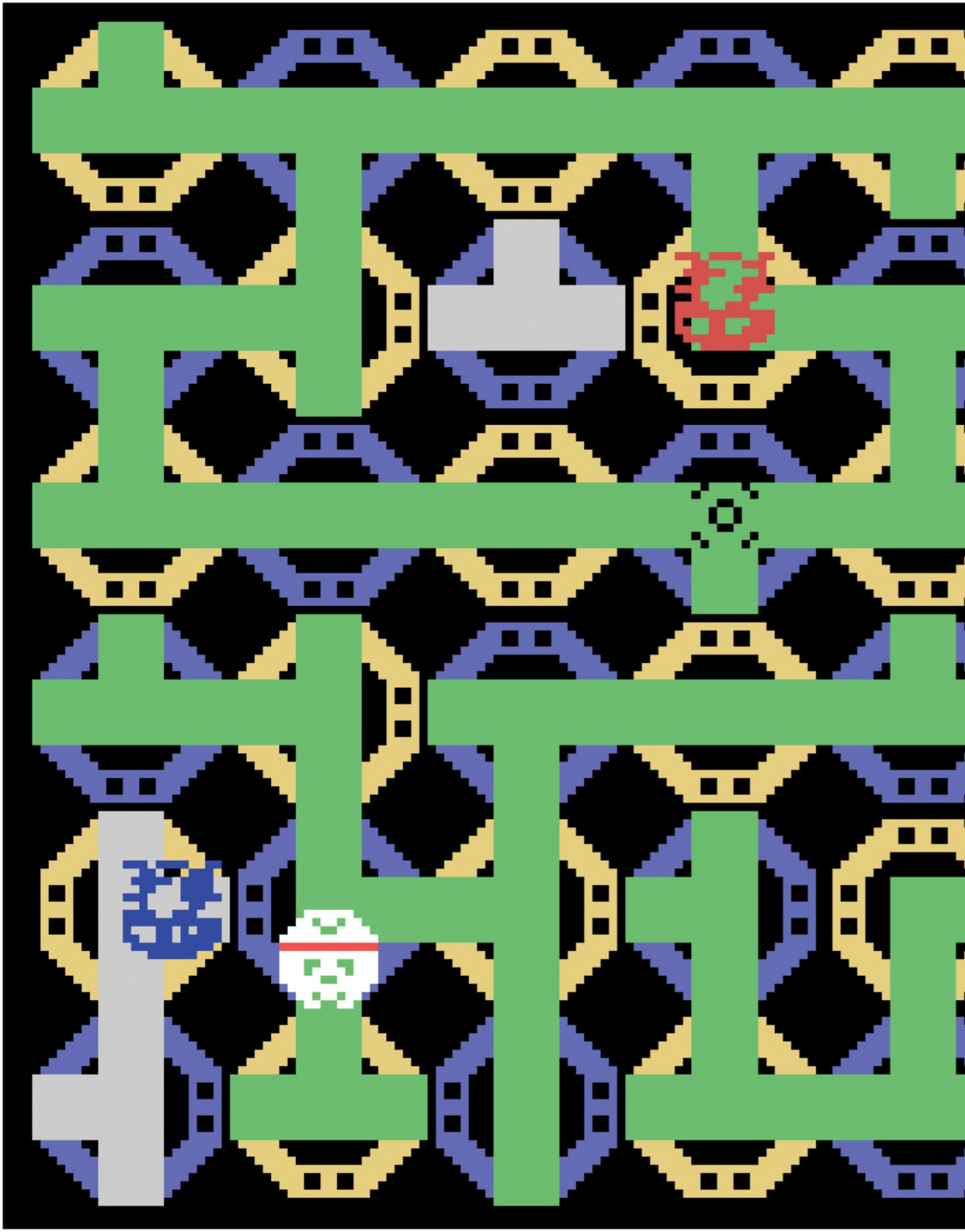
"The only thing that would make her less attractive is if she was ginger," says a caption in Tim's review of *Rule Of Rose*. We'll be inviting Nick's four ginger sisters to rate Tim's looks in a future issue.

Edge

Sonic The Hedgehog is here and it's a massive disappointment – trying to control the game's three playable characters is "like trying to shake hands with a waterfall", according to a 3/10 review.

Next3

"Internet Kills Magazine," is the headline for a report on the unfortunate closure of the *Official US PlayStation Magazine*. "We're here to stay," says *Next3*, which closed just under a year later.



Zenji

"I'M GONNA GET MYSELF CONNECTED"

» COLECOVISION » 1984 » ACTION GRAPHICS

If I'm looking for an easy way to occupy myself, a good maze game or a good puzzle game will usually make for a safe bet. If you give me a game that combines both, there's a good chance that I will stay up until the early hours of the morning – and that makes *Zenji* a very dangerous game. Originally designed for the Atari 8-bit range by Matthew Hubbard, Activision had the game converted to a variety of systems and it's the ColecoVision one that I first came across.

The basic goal of the game is to ensure that every piece of the maze is connected to a central point, which you'll achieve by moving around the maze and rotating sections one at a time. It's easy to see which ones aren't yet connected because they're shown in grey, in contrast to the green ones that are connected, but it's not so easy to actually connect them because you've got to reach them first. Changing the layout to gain access to disconnected sections can inadvertently cause more disconnections, and that's without even considering the marauding enemies that inhabit the maze. If that all wasn't enough, there's also a time limit to contend with. It's all fairly easy to manage in the early stages of the game, but the mazes start to increase in size as you make progress through the game and the action naturally becomes ever more frantic.

Zenji is one of those games that doesn't seem to get a ton of love these days, despite having been well received in its time. That might partially be down to the ColecoVision game's release during the decline of the North American console market, but that doesn't account for the other versions. It's not the most spectacular-looking game, but if you're looking for a fun and challenging maze game to try, this is one that is easy to recommend.

THE MAKING OF SONIC 3 THE HEDGEHOG + SONIC & KNUCKLES

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER:** SEGA TECHNICAL INSTITUTE
- **RELEASED:** 1994
- **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

IN 1993, SEGA HAD A PROBLEM – EVEN WITH SONIC SPEED, IT COULDN'T FINISH ITS STAR'S MOST AMBITIOUS ADVENTURE ON TIME. THE SOLUTION? A PROJECT SO AMBITIOUS THAT IT HAS NEVER BEEN REPLICATED. SONIC TEAM'S TAKASHI IIZUKA TELLS US HOW IT WAS DONE

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
YEAR: 1992

SONIC SPINBALL
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
YEAR: 1993

COMIX ZONE (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
YEAR: 1995

***Sonic The Hedgehog 2* was a game that really redefined the standards for a blockbuster videogame release – its extravagant hype campaign and co-ordinated international release were very uncommon at the time, but they paid dividends for Sega as the game sold millions of copies worldwide.** But the creation of that game was fraught – a large number of concepts were scrapped outright, a prototype cartridge was stolen from a toy fair in New York and major changes were still being made during the final week of development. One of the big problems was the choice to develop the game at Sega Technical Institute in the USA, with a mixed Japanese and American development team – in **Retro Gamer** 175, game designer Hirokazu Yasuhara told us that, "Trying to establish a multicultural development team was meaningful, but it should not be done for a project with a very tight schedule."

The result was that while *Sonic* development continued at STI, the American developers would split off to work on *Sonic Spinball*, while *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* was developed at Sega Technical Institute in the USA with almost exclusively Japanese staff. Key returning staff from *Sonic 2* included Yuji Naka, now a producer as well as lead programmer, Hirokazu Yasuhara, credited as director as well as senior game designer, and senior programmer Masanobu Yamamoto. Takashi Iizuka, today the *Sonic* series producer at Sonic Team, came on board as a senior game designer having previously worked on *Golden Axe III*. "I was living outside of Japan for the first time during *Sonic 3*'s development, so it was one culture shock after another on a daily basis for me," he recalls. "I hadn't even heard of Halloween before, so it was really surprising to see everyone at STI sitting down for serious meetings while dressed up in costumes."

Just like *Sonic 2*, the third main game was also subject to major time pressures – in part because of experimental work that the team did during early development. Feeling that the previous game had already come close to the limits of the Mega Drive, *Sonic 3* was originally slated to use the same enhancement chip as *Virtua Racing*. Speaking to Japan's *Sega Magazine* in 1997, with translation from shmuplations.com, Yuji Naka said, "Up till about June of 1993, the *Sonic 3* development included the SVP. It featured isometric 3D graphics, and you could rotate and turn the game field." Of course, this design was scrapped, with Naka continuing, "Unfortunately, in June we realised that development of the SVP chip probably wouldn't be finished by the end of the year. So we abandoned all the programming and

» [Mega Drive] This infamous object requires you to move the d-pad to move it, but that's not obvious.

» Takashi Iizuka, *Sonic* series producer at Sonic Team.

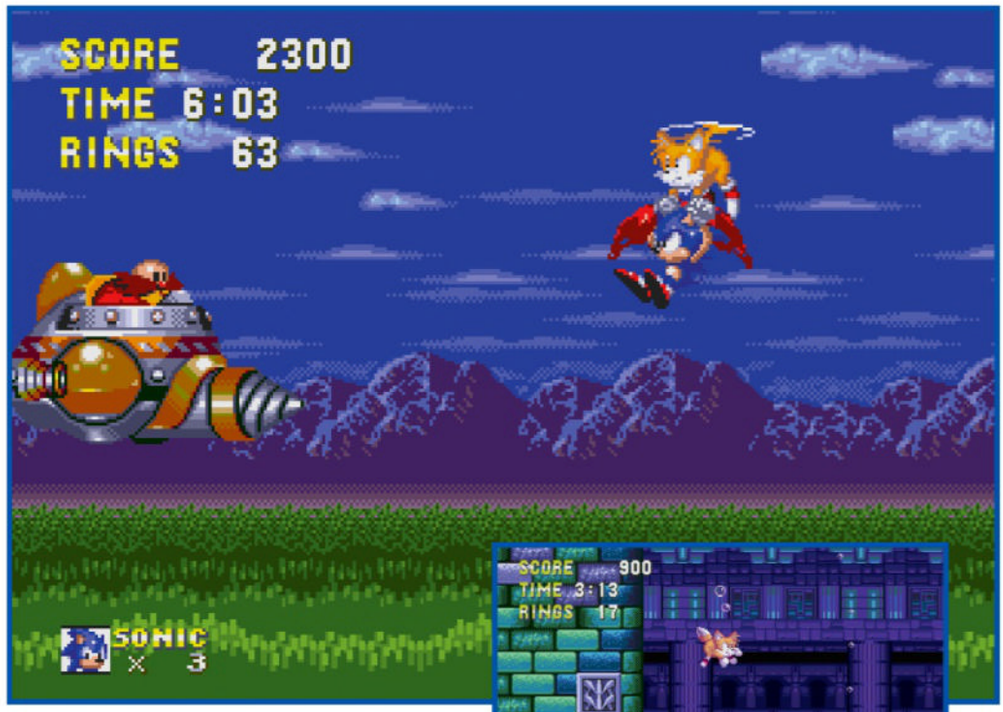
» [Mega Drive] Here comes Knuckles, in one of his trademark ambushes on Sonic and Tails.

[Mega Drive] The burning of Angel Island Zone makes for a dramatic transition in the game's opening moments.

> "SONIC'S PLAYSTYLE WAS HORIZONTAL, WHILE KNUCKLES' CLIMBING AND GLIDING ALLOWED US TO BRING IN VERTICAL PLAY"
> **TAKASHI IIZUKA**

work we'd done up to then. In the remaining six months we had for *Sonic 3*, we had to start entirely from zero and re-do everything."

Virtua Racing ultimately launched just six weeks after *Sonic The Hedgehog 3*, but in that interview, Naka claimed that meeting a February 1994 release date was crucial because Sega had entered into a $20 million promotional deal with McDonald's for that month. Takashi Iizuka confirms that "it wasn't realistic to change that" promotion to coincide with a slightly later release, but also he offers a different reason for the abandonment of the enhancement chip, telling us, "Support for the SVP chip was nothing more than a research experiment to see if we could get Sonic moving in 3D. In the end we found that it could only handle a polygon count similar to *Virtua Racing*, so we decided that it wasn't a good fit for a *Sonic* game."



» [Mega Drive] An aerial boss battle in which Tails carries Sonic was a brand-new concept for *Sonic 3*.

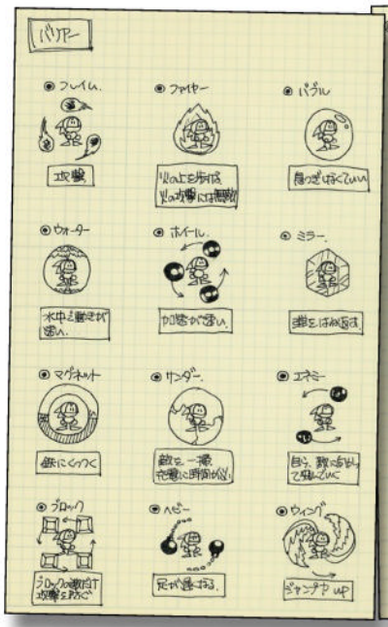
» [Mega Drive] Swimming is very helpful to Tails – that Robotnik monitor rather less so.

Regardless of the precise reasoning for abandoning the SVP chip, the result was the same – by June 1993, there was a tight deadline to meet and no substantial work done. The team would settle on revisiting the tried-and-true platform design. "We wanted to make *Sonic 3* more epic than *Sonic 2*," says Iizuka. "Specifically, that meant strengthening the story elements, adding uniqueness to the Act 1 and 2 pairs, adding a new playable character, expanding each stage, adding new routes for each character and enhancing 2P versus play." Some of these enhancements were very straightforward. Distinct musical arrangements and subtle background changes helped to differentiate Act 1 from Act 2 of each stage, as did the addition of more bosses. "We didn't want Act 1 and Act 2 to feel too repetitive, but rather have each reach its own peak. Act 2 featured battles with Dr Eggman [Robotnik], so for Act 1 we created battles against just his robots, spicing up the fun when it came to boss battles," Iizuka recalls.

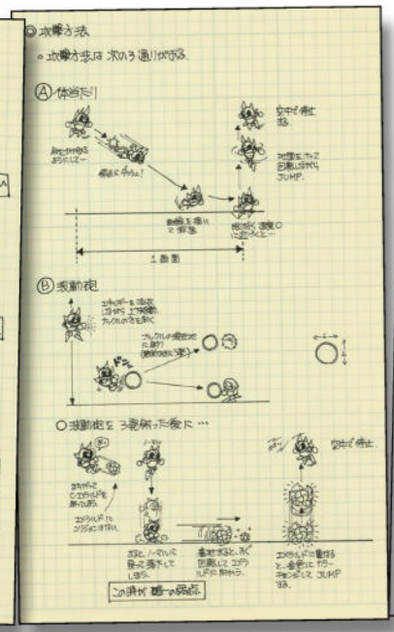
The new playable character was Knuckles, designed by Takashi Yuda. "We wanted to create a character of a similar size and stature to rival Sonic beyond the Mecha Sonic and Metal Sonic characters of the previous games. Those characters were very cool, but Knuckles let us create an antagonist where we could really shape his personality and take on the journey that we did," says Iizuka. "As for his abilities, we were always keen to explore how alternative gameplay mechanics and traversal could make an impact on *Sonic*'s traditional level design, and we felt that his ability to glide and climb gave players new ways and reasons to play each zone."

Those abilities actually gave *Sonic 3*'s level designs a whole new shape. "Knuckles' ability to punch through rocks allowed us to create routes that only he could use," Iizuka explains. "Sonic's playstyle was horizontal, while Knuckles' climbing and gliding allowed us to bring in vertical play. He allows for different experiences from Sonic, such as climbing walls to find secret areas or gliding between walls to navigate a way upward." Even if you're not playing as Knuckles, this is apparent. *Sonic 3*'s stages are massive, sprawling things compared to those of previous games, with designs that are up to twice as tall as those featured in *Sonic 2*. *Sonic 3* increased the use of vertical wrap-around in its stages compared to *Sonic 2*, allowing for more stages with a feeling of even greater height.

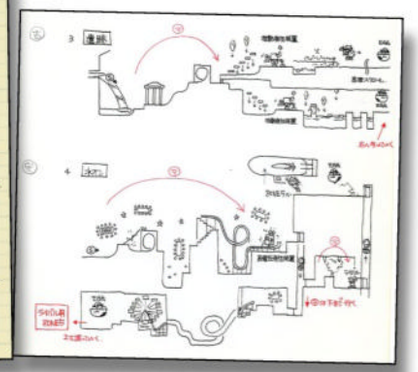
Adding Knuckles also aided the storytelling aspect of the game, giving an extra dimension to the plot. "We had the idea from the beginning that Knuckles would first be an enemy but later become playable. So we worked Knuckles into the story and had him appear as an enemy from the outset," Iizuka recalls. The first two games had used short in-engine scenes to depict key events and that technique was expanded here – Knuckles managed to dispossess Sonic of the Chaos Emeralds in the game's intro, and showed up frequently in scripted



» Some shield concepts, like Magnet and Lightning, ended up being merged together.



» Here's a concept document showing various attack patterns that Mecha Sonic could potentially use.



» This drawing shows the game flow, including Carnival Night Zone's lost transition to Flying Battery Zone.

KNOCK KNOCK, IT'S KNUCKLES

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT SONIC'S FEISTY FOE-TURNED-FRIEND

Knuckles is one of the most popular characters in the *Sonic* cast, as fans instantly took to his rough-and-ready demeanour and cool abilities. He's one of just a few *Sonic* characters to have been given his own starring roles, including the 32X game *Knuckles Chaotix*, various comics and the forthcoming Paramount Plus series *Knuckles*, a spin-off of the *Sonic* movies in which Idris Elba will reprise his role as voice actor. Here's what makes the red echidna tick.

■ Knuckles takes guarding Angel Island and the Chaos Emeralds seriously, but being the last survivor of his civilisation, he's socially naive and has been easily misled by Robotnik a few times.

■ Character designer Takashi Yuda has said that this white mark on Knuckles' chest was included when a collaboration with a certain footwear manufacturer was under consideration.

■ These are hands you don't want to catch – Knuckles has major punching power and can smash rocks with ease. He can also use them to climb walls, and in later games, dig into the ground.

■ These spines aren't just fashionable – they're the secret to Knuckles' ability to glide, allowing him to cross long distances that Sonic can't. Occasionally, they're referred to as dreadlocks.

■ Though Knuckles would never skip leg day, he's not quite as fast as Sonic. He also can't jump as high, so certain boss battles in the classic 2D games are adjusted to compensate.

» [Mega Drive] Sonic's new Insta-shield is perfect for defeating otherwise impossible enemies.

» [Mega Drive] Climbing gives Knuckles easy access to places that even Tails' flight can't reach.

» [Mega Drive] Grab the right one, or prepare yourself for a nasty jab in the backside.

ambushes from there on. Just like the story scenes in the prior games, *Sonic 3*'s story scenes were designed not to use text or voice acting. "As *Sonic* is an action game played all around the world, we didn't want to use text to tell the story, but thought of ways to make cutscenes that could be followed visually," Iizuka explains. "It was very difficult to express the scene of Knuckles actually having been deceived by Dr Eggman without using any text."

> "I REMEMBER THINKING THE LOCK-ON CARTRIDGE WAS AN INSANE IDEA!"
> **TAKASHI IIZUKA**

Magazine previews mentioned a "helper mechanic" in which Tails could provide aid to Sonic – something later seen in a prototype discovered in 2019, but which ultimately fell by the wayside. "Just like every gameplay feature decision, we try things, see how they feel, test them and if they don't add to the gameplay experience then we don't see them as necessary as a final game feature," responds Iizuka when asked about it. "We felt this might detract from the overall player experience with Sonic so it didn't make it into the final game." That decision didn't stop Tails from helping out though – players were given the ability to control him while flying, and Sonic could grab hold of him for an airlift to higher places during co-op play. Tails also gained the ability to swim, but wasn't strong enough to carry Sonic while doing so.

For Sonic, the team experimented with a variety of new techniques including a move that is coincidentally close to the Drop Dash from *Sonic Mania*, which was discovered in a *Sonic 3* prototype found in 2019. However, the other characters showed the way for Sonic's newest trick. "As you know, up until *Sonic 2* you could control your character using only the jump action. But to add the flight action for the newly added Knuckles and Tails, it was necessary to add the ability to press the jump button while in mid-air. And because Sonic can't fly or glide, we added the Insta-shield," says Iizuka. This move allowed Sonic to briefly gain invincibility and an increased attacking range, which is great for taking out spiked enemies.

While every character gained elemental protection and other benefits from the new Flame, Water and Lightning Shields, Sonic gained brand-new moves – a mid-air dash, a bounce attack and a double jump respectively. "Coming up with new ideas and gameplay mechanics for how these Shields could protect the player or interact with objects in the world, like you say, the Magnetic Rings, was a lot of fun," says Iizuka. "We really looked at how the different elements would work together – for example, the Flame Shield could provide a quick burst of speed, but you'd have to be careful not to fall into water if you didn't want to lose it. I felt that it all contributed to a more engaging experience."

Everything about *Sonic 3* was shaping up to be bigger and better than ever. A brand-new special stage and three bonus stages were in the works, and instead of taking place on a selection of standard stages, the new Competition Mode had brand-new bespoke

SCENES UNSEEN

WHAT SECRETS LURK IN THE SONIC 3 PROTOTYPE?

■ The title screen is an obvious placeholder – the 3D render of Sonic is a little different from the one used in the final game, and its colours have been crudely converted for use on the Mega Drive.

■ Plans originally called for Sonic to arrive on Angel Island by surfboard, before the intro sequence was reworked to incorporate Tails and a Super Sonic transformation.

■ Early Knuckles sprites looked rather different to those used in the finished game. We think he looks a bit meaner than he does in his final incarnation – what do you think?

designs tailor-made for racing. Boss battles required more strategy, including some encounters in which the enemies needed to be tricked into hurting themselves. Sonic and Tails had redesigned sprites to go with a refreshed graphical direction, and the game was even set to feature music from Michael Jackson as well as Sega's highly capable composers – read more about that in The Jackson Factor. Best of all, Sega had managed to keep everything highly secret in a way that it hadn't for *Sonic 2*.

But as the autumn of 1993 wore on, it became clear that it simply wasn't going to be possible to finish the game as planned while meeting that all-important February release date. In the *Sega Magazine* interview, Naka stated that conversations about splitting *Sonic 3* across two cartridges came "at the very end of development" and that the method to combine cartridges was figured out "at the very, very last minute", with the game's programming revised to take the Lock-On cartridge into account. "It was a very difficult decision to split the game into two cartridges. One major issue was how to make a cohesive product when it came to the second half of the game," says Iizuka. "Data couldn't be carried over if we used two separate cartridges, making the Knuckles routes we had built into the *Sonic 3* stages unplayable. That's where the idea came for the Lock-On cartridge, allowing the two cartridges to work together. I remember thinking it was an insane idea! I was very impressed with Sega being able to make it a reality." The *Sonic 3* prototype found in 2019 suggests that the process of splitting the games started about a month before the final build.

LOCKED AND LOADED

JUST HOW DID SEGA WORK KNUCKLES INTO SONIC 2?

■ "Even I was surprised by the idea to use Lock-On cartridges to make Knuckles appear in *Sonic 2*," says Takashi Iizuka. "Nowadays it's easy to update older games with a patch, but you obviously can't change the code on a game contained in a ROM cartridge. The programmers who made it happen were just amazing." Indeed, the inclusion of Knuckles in *Sonic 2* seems technologically miraculous – *Sonic 3* had been created with the Lock-On cartridge in mind, but *Sonic 2* was completed well before it was conceived.

The truth is that the game was essentially rewritten to take Knuckles into account. When *Sonic & Knuckles* boots up, the first thing it does is to check the header data of the locked-on cartridge. If *Sonic 2* is detected, control is passed to a secondary 256KB chip in the *Sonic & Knuckles* cartridge, which contains the vast majority of program data required for Knuckles in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* – level layouts, programming for Knuckles' moves and more. The *Sonic 2* cartridge mostly provides art assets, although the sound driver is run directly from the *Sonic 2* cartridge as well.

So if that was possible for *Sonic 2*, what about the original game? "I'm not a programmer so I don't know the details, but I heard that it wasn't possible because the data was structured differently in *Sonic 1*. That's why the new concept for Blue Sphere was created," replies Iizuka. When *Sonic 1* is detected, a special mode is activated with thousands of bonus stages to try. Any Mega Drive game under 16 Mbit will also trigger a limited version of this, generating a stage based on the ROM header data, but those over 16 Mbit won't because the *Sonic & Knuckles* cartridge doesn't map the area of data including the header.

» [Mega Drive] New power-ups rewarded players for using Knuckles to explore previously inaccessible areas.

» [Mega Drive] Knuckles replaces Sonic on the Casino Night Zone reels in a neat little touch.

■ Here's that "helper mechanic" in action – Tails is scripted to fly down early in the stage, giving Sonic the opportunity to catch a lift to higher ground. It's a little clunky in action.

■ The background for Hydrocity Zone Act 1 was initially green and grey with plenty of plant life, but it was completely redrawn for the final game.

THE JACKSON FACTOR

IS THE KING OF POP'S MUSIC REALLY IN SONIC 3?

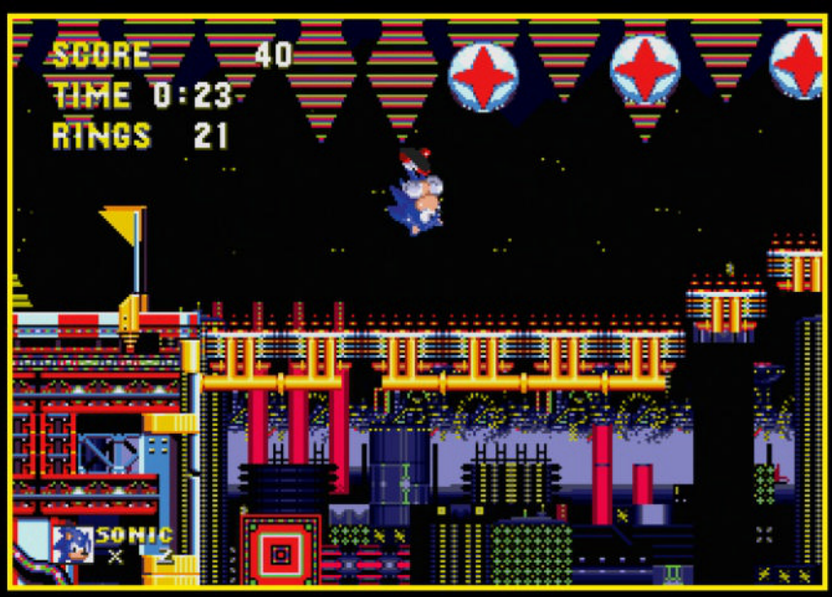
» The 2020 vinyl pressing of The Jetzons' *Hard Times* used Ice Cap Zone artwork on the sleeve.

Michael Jackson had a long-standing association with Sega during his life, from the *Moonwalker* games to *Michael Jackson In Scramble Training* and Space *Channel 5*. It is also pretty well established that for some time, the pop icon was involved in creating music for *Sonic 3* – Sega figures including Yuji Naka, Naoto Ohshima and Roger Hector have all confirmed that he was linked with the project, as have Brad Buxer, Doug Grigsby III and Cirocco Jones, songwriters credited on both *Sonic 3* and Michael Jackson's music.

What remains contentious is whether or not any of Jackson's music actually made it to the finished product. Michael Jackson's name does not appear in the game's credits list, though this is no surprise – Sega would have wanted to distance itself from him due to allegations of child sexual abuse that arose during the game's development, which were only settled days before release. Roger Hector stated in issue 244 of **Retro Gamer** that it was hastily removed at the request of Sega's Japanese headquarters, with Howard Drossin replacing "basically 16 weeks' worth of work, in a week and a half". In a 2016 interview with the Huffington Post, Brad Buxer offered an alternative explanation, claiming that Jackson "wanted his name taken off the credits if they couldn't get it to sound better".

However, in a 2022 interview with the Abbey Road Institute Paris, Buxer stated, "I'd been doing all the Sega *Sonic The Hedgehog* cues because the way Michael works is, he'll tell Sega he'll do it and then he says, 'Brad, you do it.' Right? So I think we did one cue together with Michael. One. And the rest, I had to do it myself." Buxer goes on to say that 41 musical cues had been created. He also says that for *Stranger In Moscow*, the song closely linked to *Sonic 3*'s credits tune, he had played the verse and subsequently written the chorus in half an hour during a phone call with Jackson, who had "nothing in mind for that, nothing". One tune that Jackson definitely had no involvement in was Ice Cap Zone's theme, which was based on the song *Hard Times* by Brad Buxer's old band The Jetzons.

So is Michael Jackson's music really in *Sonic 3*? If you think of Michael Jackson as a collective creative enterprise which covers the songwriters, session musicians and others that he worked with, then it's hard to deny that claim. But as for the man himself, the chances seem slim. We know that only a relatively small number of *Sonic 3*'s tracks were replaced in the Jackson-less versions of the game, so if he really did contribute to just one of 41 tunes, there's every chance it was never used to begin with.



» [Mega Drive] Carnival Night Zone is one of the three zones that had its music replaced in *Sonic Origins*.

» [Mega Drive] You can lead this buffoonish rock monster into defeating itself, if you like.

The decision to split the game had some knock-on effects in the game design. Flying Battery Zone was originally positioned between Carnival Night Zone and Ice Cap Zone, but was moved to become the second stage of *Sonic & Knuckles* instead. "I don't think there were any other stages that were added or moved, but we did make some spec changes," says Iizuka. "The Launch Base boss was an Eggman boss as usual, but splitting the game made it the last stage of *Sonic 3*, so we added Big Arms. Mushroom Hill became the first stage of *Sonic & Knuckles*, so we readjusted the difficulty to make it easier than originally planned." Two bonus stages were left unused to be finished later on, and most significantly Knuckles was held back as a playable character and appeared solely as an antagonist outside of Competition Mode.

***Sonic 3* released on 2 February 1994 in North America, and followed to the UK on 24 February, with some European countries and Australia following in March.** In Japan, where the Mega Drive was less popular, the game finally released on 27 May. Despite its truncated nature, the game was very well-received by the majority of gaming magazines. *Mean Machines Sega* gave it 94%, with Radion Automatic saying, "The whole game is packed with new ideas and the levels, whilst few in number, are absolutely huge." *Mega* also noted the size of the levels and praised the "new and bizarre power-ups" and concluded by saying that "this is probably about as good as *Sonic* can possibly get".

By this point, critics had developed a fatigue for platform games in general and *Sonic* in specific, but *Sonic 3* proved good enough to overcome it. *Computer & Video Games* awarded the game 94%, with reviewer Deniz Ahmet admitting that he was "all set to be highly critical of *Sonic 3* after hearing that it was more of the same", but found "there are so many new and imaginative ideas that I have no complaints". Likewise, *Sega Zone*'s Jonathan Nash "tried to hate it", but found that "my pre-prepared words of disapproval were forgotten" upon playing it, and gave it 93%. Where complaints arose, they were mostly

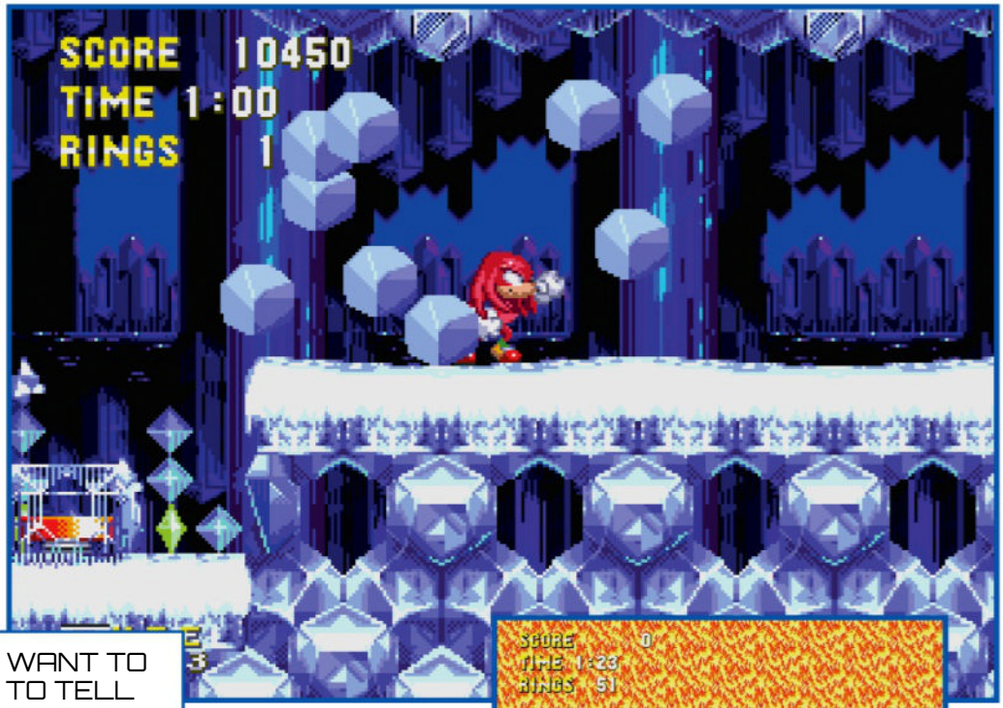
» [Mega Drive] In this cutscene, Knuckles is made aware of Robotnik's *shocking* betrayal. (Sorry.)

about the difficulty level. *Mean Machines Sega* said that "completing the game without the Emeralds is not very difficult at all", while *Sega Zone* felt that you could "quite easily storm through the game in an afternoon". *Sega Pro* gave it 87%, saying that it was a "state-of-the-art platformer" that would have scored 95% were it not for the £59.99 price tag, arguing "few games are worth that much money and when you couple this with the length of time it'll take to complete it, it's a joke". *GamesMaster* also gave the game 87%, saying that "the similarities are far more numerous than the differences" when compared to its predecessors. Digitiser made similar complaints in a review that is remembered to this day for its 72% score.

> "WE DIDN'T WANT TO USE TEXT TO TELL THE STORY, BUT THOUGHT OF WAYS TO MAKE CUTSCENES THAT COULD BE FOLLOWED VISUALLY"
> **TAKASHI IIZUKA**

Even if you weren't reading magazines, *Sonic 3*'s incomplete nature was somewhat obvious – the game's notoriously difficult-to-access level select screen listed stages that were completely inaccessible, and the sound test was filled with loads of unused music. But the fact that *Sonic 3* had been split into two parts was no secret at all, with *Mean Machines Sega*'s review of *Sonic 3* talking about future plans for "a deluxe 24-meg edition of the game, with extra levels and enhanced play", as well as "an upgrade for the 16-meg edition, a plug-through cart with two ends, which will also work with your *Sonic 1* and *2* carts to create extra levels". Development of a single-cartridge version of the complete game was underway but ultimately scrapped in favour of the plug-through cartridge that became *Sonic & Knuckles*.

For Iizuka and the rest of the team, the extra time was a major relief – though *Sonic & Knuckles* launched just eight months after *Sonic 3*, compared to over fourteen months between *Sonic 3* and *Sonic 2*, *Sonic & Knuckles* was a far more relaxed project. "The development time for *Sonic 3* was extremely tight, and there was barely time to sleep," Iizuka recalls. "But we still worked on some *Sonic & Knuckles* stages during *Sonic 3* development and *Sonic & Knuckles* development continued in the time between *Sonic 3*'s master ROM and its launch date, so launching it eight months later wasn't that tight of a schedule. That's why we had time to come up with additional specs like Lock-On cartridges and Knuckles in *Sonic 2*."



» [Mega Drive] Knuckles puts his fists to good use, smashing through an icy obstruction.

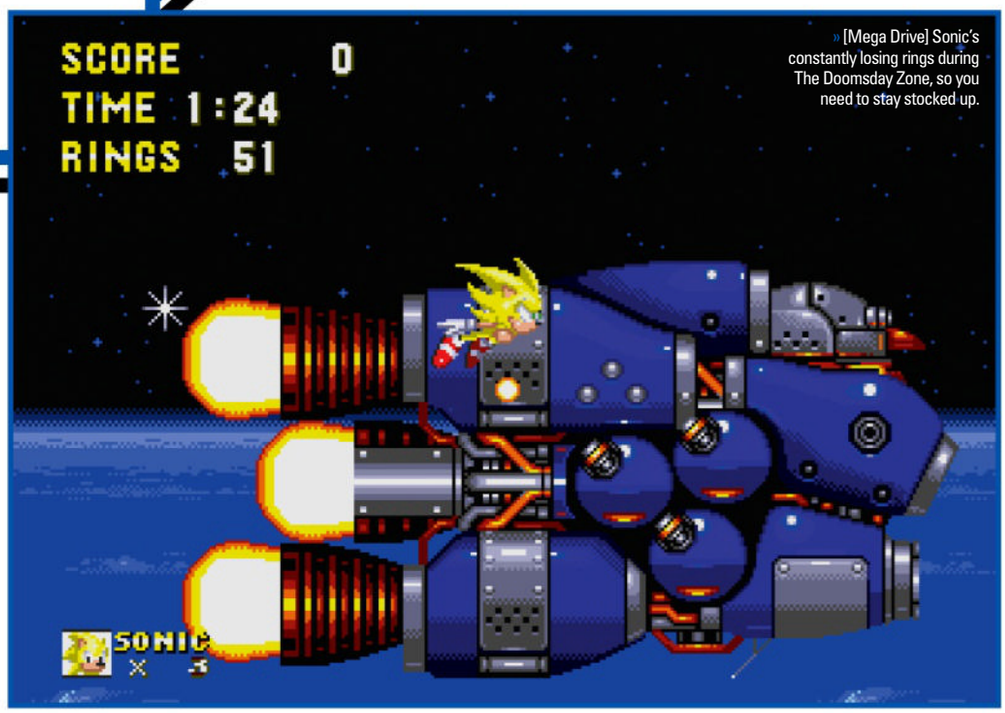
With the engine already in place, the team was free to create the remaining planned stages and implement the two additional bonus games, but for many players the opportunity to take control of Sonic's new rival was the key attraction. "As you know, in the latter half of the story Knuckles learns that he had been deceived by Eggman and joins Sonic. So the idea was to add him as a playable character after the player completed Sonic's storyline," says Iizuka, explaining how things would have worked had *Sonic 3* been released as a singular product. *Sonic & Knuckles* allows you instant access to the echidna whether combined with *Sonic 3* or not, but in spite of that change of arrangements, Knuckles' story is still influenced by the original plan. "When playing as Knuckles, Sonic has already defeated Eggman according to the storyline, so the Death Egg is gone. That's why we replaced Eggman with Egg Robo, and the last boss is Mecha Sonic rather than the Death Egg Robot," Iizuka tells us. "Instead of just adding a playable character, we wanted to tell a story that fits the character."

Sonic & Knuckles also included The Doomsday Zone – a secret final confrontation ▶

» [Mega Drive] Having the appropriate Elemental Shield can make certain sections of the game a doddle.

» [Mega Drive] Mecha Sonic powered by the Master Emerald? That doesn't seem like good news for Knuckles.

» [Mega Drive] Reversed gravity is just one of many fun features of the Death Egg Zone.



» [Mega Drive] Sonic's constantly losing rings during The Doomsday Zone, so you need to stay stocked up.

that can only be accessed as Sonic, and only if you've gained enough Chaos Emeralds to transform into Super Sonic or his upgraded Hyper Sonic form. "It was designed as an aerial battle. Sonic is able to fly when transformed, so we removed the ground completely and had him flying through space," says Iizuka. This climactic battle proved to be the origin of a tradition of the *Sonic* series, as it provided the basis for memorable boss fights in later games including showdowns against Perfect Chaos, Finalhazard and the Time Eater.

» [Mega Drive] Endless Mine has some of the finest music in a series renowned for great soundtracks.

» [Mega Drive] Blue Spheres is a popular special stage, which later returned in *Sonic Mania*.

Released globally in October 1994, *Sonic & Knuckles* received another strong set of reviews. *Mega* awarded the game 92%, saying, "The main criticism about the first three games being too easy could in no way be applied to this!" *Sega Power* felt similarly and gave the game 90%, while *Sega Pro*'s 90% review highlighted the differing routes each character offered. In *CVG*'s 91% review, Rik Skews noted that he "expected *Sonic & Knuckles* to be scrappy" due to its short development time but felt that it "makes a great conclusion to the series". *GamesMaster*'s 90% review felt that the increased difficulty and backwards compatibility meant that the game was "going to last".

A lack of originality was the main cause for critical concern. Though *Sega Magazine* awarded *Sonic & Knuckles* 92% and Richard

FRESHLY SQUEEZED

WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE NEW UPGRADE TO SONIC'S LATEST COMPILATION

» [PS5] So is it now *Sonic 3 & Knuckles & Amy*? That seems a little unwieldy.

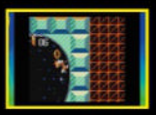
If you're looking to play *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* on modern consoles, the only way to do it is as part of *Sonic Origins*, which was released in 2022. The compilation also includes *Sonic 1*, *2* and *CD*, and all of them are presented in remastered form via the Retro Engine, with FMV intros, widescreen display, the ability to retry special stages and a brand-new Mission Mode. There are plenty of goodies to unlock too, including concept art, music and videos. We reviewed the compilation in issue 235 and gave it 80%, saying that while the new versions are "mostly very good" a variety of changes and minor bugs meant that "Mega Drive purists may wish to consider other options".

Sonic Origins has recently been upgraded with the *Plus Expansion Pack* DLC, for £8.99. This gives you access to Knuckles in *Sonic CD*, Amy Rose as a new playable character in all of the main games, and 12 extra games from the Game Gear – and unlike the main games, these aren't enhanced ports. They play fine, but there are some oddities with the sound emulation and none of the visual options you might hope for. Here's a look at all of the additional games.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

Sonic's 8-bit debut is like a remix of the Mega Drive game with a mixture of familiar and new stages, all with unique layouts and bosses. It doesn't have spectacular loops, but it's more challenging and has unique level designs including a vertical climb, a maze and an auto-scrolling stage.

SONIC CHAOS



Tails joins Sonic for this adventure, complete with his ability to fly. For the first time in the 8-bit games, Chaos Emeralds are earned in special stages rather than found in regular gameplay. This is a good starting point, as it's a relatively easy game compared to its predecessors.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

This is totally different to the Mega Drive's *Sonic 2*, with Tails not being a playable character. The Game Gear version is notoriously tough, with many players failing to pass the first boss. Even then, you'll need all the Chaos Emeralds to take on Robotnik in Crystal Egg Zone.

SONIC TRIPLE TROUBLE

New antagonists ahoy, as Sonic and Tails are pursued by Knuckles and Nack The Weasel – or Fang The Sniper in Japan, where he is a jerboa. There's some great music here and Sonic gets to go snowboarding again, and the level of challenge is on the easier side.

Leadbetter called it "the perfect buy if you already own all the other *Sonic* games", Radion Automatic recommended that those "looking for something to renew your faith in the genre" try *Dynamite Headdy* instead. In *Mean Machines Sega*, Steve Merrett felt it was "just more of the same and, consequently, is likely to be usurped by Sega's new hero, *Dynamite Headdy*", and offered a review score of 85%. Likewise, in *Games World*'s 83% review, Dave Perry felt that "our once plucky blue hero is starting to look tired".

The brilliance of *Sonic & Knuckles* was that while it was substantial enough to work as a stand-alone game, the Lock-On cartridge made it a unique offering at a time when expansion packs were typically a technical impossibility in the console market. What had started off as a problem ended up being a creative and commercial triumph. Both halves of the project were fine games taken alone, but elevated when joined together – *Sonic 3* owners got a great reason to revisit the game, and got benefits like Tails and the save game feature that didn't exist in *Sonic & Knuckles* alone. Add the other benefits of the Lock-On cartridge – see Locked And Loaded for those – and *Sonic & Knuckles* was the perfect addition to a *Sonic* collection. For Sega, it provided not only a key game for the holiday season of 1994, but a way of shifting more copies of back-catalogue games. Overall, *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles* combined sold four million copies.

> "THE IDEA WAS TO ADD KNUCKLES AS A PLAYABLE CHARACTER AFTER THE PLAYER COMPLETED SONIC'S STORYLINE"
> **TAKASHI IIZUKA**

***Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles* later made their way to PC in 1997 as part of *Sonic & Knuckles Collection*, which offers the ability to play either game individually or both together.** This version features MIDI music and replaces some of the tracks attributed to Michael Jackson's team with tunes that were present in a prototype build of the Mega Drive game. The games arrived on the Saturn as part of *Sonic Jam* the same year with no substantial changes, and emulated Mega Drive versions were a staple of Sega's compilations until 2010, when re-releases dried up. *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* finally returned in combined and remastered form as part of the *Sonic Origins* compilation in 2022. This version featured new arrangements of the music found in the *Sonic 3* prototype and *Sonic & Knuckles Collection*, suggesting that while no legal action has ever been made public, music rights were at the heart of that lengthy absence.

Looking back at *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles*, Iizuka's only quibble with the end product has been resolved. "I do wish we had been able to sell *Sonic 3* and ***Sonic & Knuckles*** as one complete game. So I was happy that we were able to accomplish that with *Sonic Origins* last year," he tells us. But the split release has done nothing to damage the standing of the game among fans – while *Sonic 2* is arguably the classic *Sonic* game that has the most appeal among the general gaming population, Sonic fans tend to hold *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* as the best of the classics. "It makes me truly happy to hear that," Iizuka says. "Many of the people on the development team were veterans who had worked on *Sonic 1* and *Sonic 2*, and I think it's the result of everyone's determination to make a game that outshines the previous two. I'm proud that I was able to be a part of *Sonic 3*'s development." ✱

» [Mega Drive] Here's a game with gacha mechanics that we're actually happy to play.

ORIGINS

SONIC BLAST

■ Sonic and Knuckles star in this platformer, one of the very last Game Gear games to be released. The choice to use pre-rendered 3D sprites for this was a bold one, and realistically probably not the wisest one. The gameplay also fails to live up to the standards set by its 8-bit predecessors.

SONIC SPINBALL

■ This handheld version of Sonic's pinball spin-off uses the same game structure and level themes as the Mega Drive game, but with new stage layouts and completely different bonus stages. It's a surprisingly good rendition of the game and adds welcome variety to the compilation.

SONIC DRIFT 2

■ The second attempt at doing a *Sonic* racing game on the Game Gear turned out considerably better than the first, thanks to more tracks, more racers and a better handling model. Banked corners, tunnels and point-to-point races help to set it apart from other 8-bit racing games.

TAILS' SKY PATROL

■ Originally released in Japan only, this game has you flying Tails around obstacle courses pursuing the evil Witchcart, using a ring to destroy enemies and use items. There aren't many levels to beat but you'll struggle to see them all due to the game's unexpectedly brutal difficulty level.

SONIC LABYRINTH

■ This isometric action game has Sonic hunting for keys against the clock, in order to escape to the next stage. Many fans dislike it for its slow pace, but it's not too bad – the only major issue being the utterly obtuse method of obtaining the final Chaos Emerald required for the good ending.

SONIC DRIFT

■ Sonic's racing debut takes the zones from the original game and repurposes them as racing circuits. If you're familiar with the Game Gear's take on *Super Monaco GP* you'll feel at home here, but this one wasn't particularly brilliant, and the original Game Gear release never left Japan.

TAILS ADVENTURES

■ Don't write off Tails' star turn for its slow pace, as it's a rather absorbing puzzle platformer and something of a forgotten gem. Tails can pick up various items as he explores the world, allowing him to open new paths ahead and in previously completed stages that he revisits.

DR ROBOTNIK'S MEAN BEAN MACHINE

■ Here's the *Sonic*-flavoured version of *Puyo Puyo*, and it's a mighty fine puzzle game. Match four beans of the same colour to pop them, then create combos to attack your opponent. This version has a Puzzle Mode with 30 challenges, which the Mega Drive version lacks.

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Moon Patrol

BLASTING ON THE MOVE

» ARCADE » 1982 » IREM

Although *R-Type* has now become synonymous with Irem, the developer has plenty of other fantastic arcade games in its back catalogue. One of my favourites is *Moon Patrol* and I've been playing it a lot lately thanks to its inclusion on Blaze Entertainment's *Irem Arcade 1* (which also features the aforementioned *R-Type*).

While I can't recall the year I first encountered *Moon Patrol*, I do remember the location – the annual funfair at King's Park. Every year it would turn up like clockwork and every year my dear grandparents would take me along so I could experience the dodgems, try and win a goldfish and play the many arcade games that were there.

One of the reasons that *Moon Patrol* stood out so appealingly, was because it was situated next to a *Space Invaders* cabinet. As much as I enjoyed Taito's game, it looked utterly ancient next to *Moon Patrol*, even though only four years separated them. I begged my nan for ten pence and hastily shoved it into the coin slot. Trundling across the moon's surface, taking down overhead enemies and jumping over craters was great fun and when my lives were spent I hassled my nan for another ten pence so I could play again.

I really enjoyed playing *Moon Patrol* and would always seek it out at arcades, particularly when I went on my yearly trips to Porthcawl in South Wales with my grandparents. In fact, when I was much older, I took my future wife to the seaside resort and made her visit every seafront arcade that was still there in the hopes of finding both *Moon Patrol* and *Star Wars*. We didn't find Irem's game, but we did find Atari's, not that she was interested.

I still enjoy *Moon Patrol*'s mechanics today and while it's not the fast-paced thrill ride I remember from my youth it's still an exceptionally solid shooter. And thankfully, I no longer have to go on pilgrimages to find it, as I can take it wherever I go.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

the Lords of Midnight

» The game's venerable creator, Mike Singleton, sadly passed away in 2012, aged 61.

DOOMDARK RIDER

DOOMDARK WARRIOR

THE LATE MIKE SINGLETON WAS PEERLESS WHEN IT CAME TO CREATING WHOLE WORLDS ON JUST A SPOOL OF TAPE, AND THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT REMAINS ONE OF HIS BEST-LOVED WORKS. JOIN US AS WE BRAVE ETERNAL WINTER TO RECOUNT THE WAR OF THE SOLSTICE

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

» [ZX Spectrum] The Landscaping system adds layers of detail which create a simple 3D effect. Your imagination does the rest.

Remember in the early Eighties when developers invented fantastic names for the technical advances that set their games apart? We had Sandy White's Softsolid 3D, Ultimate's Filmation and Melbourne House even coined the term '4D graphics' around 25 years before Sony had the same silly idea. And then there was Mike Singleton's *The Lords Of Midnight*, which was billed as "the world's first Epic game". Elsewhere, publisher Beyond described it as a "living fantasy novel".

When the game was released for the ZX Spectrum in summer 1984, players quickly discovered that this was no case of hyperbole – *The Lords Of Midnight* was indeed epic. It featured a huge game map consisting of 3,904 locations, and at each location the player could turn in eight directions, resulting in almost 32,000 first-person views. The game also featured 32 controllable characters and 16 different terrain types, and Mike somehow crammed all this content into around 41KB of available memory.

As for the "living fantasy novel" claim, this too was borne out. Mike was heavily inspired by Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*, of course, and the game featured a similar narrative structure. In Mike's version, the once lush land of Midnight had been forever frozen by an evil sorcerer named Doomdark and it was up to the lords of the free people, led by Luxor The Moonprince and his son Morkin, to rally together and defeat the enemy. There were actually three ways to secure victory. The quickest way was to complete Morkin's

» A broad map to the land of Midnight was printed on the back of the enclosed booklet.

» [ZX Spectrum] A warm welcome awaits when you finally reach Doomdark's stronghold.

quest, where a small fellowship ventured north to the Tower Of Doom to destroy a powerful ring – sorry, a crown, a powerful crown that's the source of Doomdark's power. With some luck (rudimentary AI meant skirmishes with enemies varied on each attempt) it was possible to complete the quest in as little as nine game days.

Taking far longer was the war scenario. Here, as Luxor, you ignored the quest and instead plotted to overthrow Doomdark's evil lair, the Citadel Of Ushgarak in the north. Obviously Doomdark controlled a huge army of foul folk and one did not simply walk into his backyard. Instead you first had to travel around the southern region and recruit the lords with the largest armies before tactically pushing north, picking off Doomdark's hoard as they

» Befitting its Epic game status, *Lords* came in a large box including a 32-page booklet and keyboard overlay (there were a *lot* of keys to learn).

"TO HELP IMMERSE PLAYERS, MIKE DEVISED A TECHNIQUE CALLED 'LANDSCAPING' WHICH CONSTRUCTED EACH VIEW USING A COMBINATION OF TERRAIN ELEMENTS"

CONVERSION CAPERS

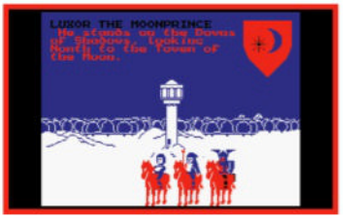
HOW THE VARIOUS VERSIONS STACK UP

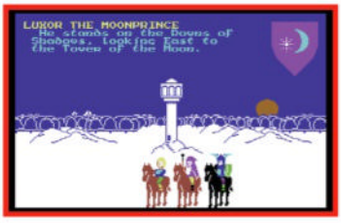
ZX SPECTRUM

The original version was a revelation on release, cramming so much game into the machine's meagre memory. The graphics were also cleverly designed and presented to overcome attribute issues. Mike had real affection for the Spectrum and it shows.

AMSTRAD CPC

This is a straight port by Rick Brown that suffers from slow screen updates (looking around and moving takes a smidge too long compared to the original). The use of Mode 1 graphics results in some unfortunate colour choices too, but it plays well and that's what counts.



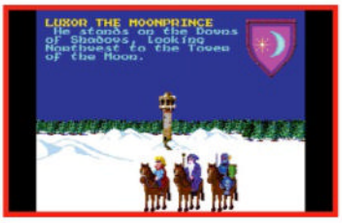


C64

Credited to Tag and The Kid (Anthony Taglione and Malcolm Hellon), this is a poorly optimised port that's even slower than the CPC version. It does introduce one neat feature – the sun is shown in the sky, giving players a visual indicator of how much daylight is left.

IOS/ANDROID

Chris Wild's mobile version is a wonderful way to revisit Midnight on touch-screen devices. Navigating the world has never been easier and it features a built-in map that populates as you explore. This and *Doomdark's Revenge* are free to download.



ZX SPECTRUM NEXT

It seems fitting to revisit Midnight on the Spectrum's spiritual successor. Developed by Matt Davies and featuring reworked 16-bit-style graphics by artist Simon Butler, this is a welcome update of the original Spectrum version for Next owners that's free to acquire.

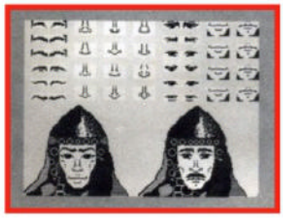
THE CONTINUING CHRONICLES

WHAT LUXOR AND HIS LORDS DID NEXT

DOOMDARK'S REVENGE

This excellent follow-up tells of Shareth, Doomdark's daughter, who lures Luxor to the land of Icemark to extract her revenge. Everything here is bigger – there are now 6,144 locations and 128 playable characters. It's also cleverer, with updated AI giving characters more freedom and intelligence. Unfortunately this also makes the game more random, preventing some of the strategic planning that you could do in the original.

THE EYE OF THE MOON

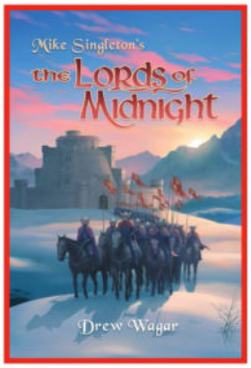


The trilogy capper was planned from the beginning but it sadly never materialised. Mike did some work on the game and it was to feature the biggest map yet with more than 16,000 locations split into 12 kingdoms, with a challenge to complete in each one. This is the only screenshot ever published, showing a new system Mike developed for giving each of the proposed 256 lords different facial features.

THE CITADEL

Developed by Mike's Maelstrom team and released for PC in 1995, the third game is a radical update that features 3D graphics and real-time movement. For fans of the original games it was perhaps too radical – and too buggy. Mike was adamant of two things: the game needed an extra six months of development, and it was NOT *The Eye Of The Moon*. That was a separate, as yet unrealised project.

» [ZX Spectrum] Night has fallen and the foul are abroad! Time to take shelter 'till dawn.



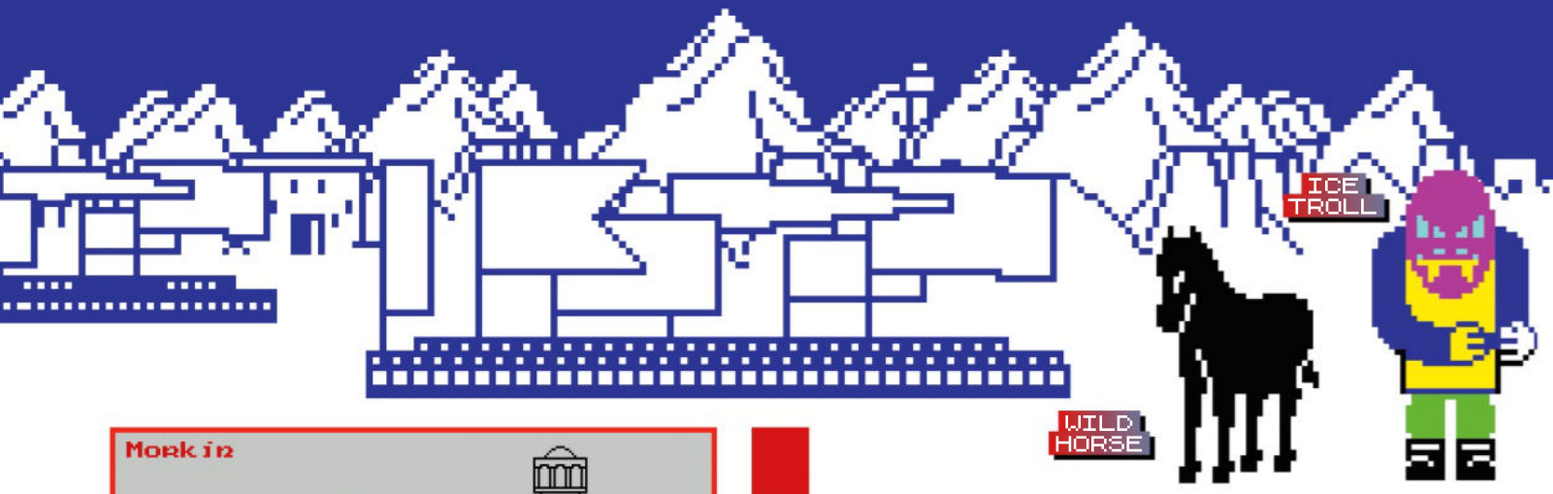
» Author Drew Wager has released novels based on *The Lords Of Midnight* and *Doomdark's Revenge*, with *The Citadel* and *The Eye Of The Moon* currently in planning.

marched south to greet you. The third way was known as a 'complete epic', where you combined both the micro and macro approaches by first seizing the crown, but not destroying it, and then defeating Doomdark in battle. For the ultimate victory you could complete the above while also attempting to recruit all 32 lords and take control of every keep and citadel in the land. Good luck with that one.

***The Lords Of Midnight* combined elements of adventure, strategy and simulation to excellent effect, with it all taking place in a world that felt very real and dangerous.**

To help immerse players in the setting, Mike devised a technique called 'Landscaping' which constructed each view using a combination of terrain elements and places of interest – mountains, forests, villages, towers, citadels and so on. For Landscaping Mike was driven by two principles. Firstly, it needed to be functional, so that the views provided the player with the visual information they needed to plan their next move. They were not just pretty pictures, there to decorate the scene. Secondly, it needed to be fast. During each game day players had to direct multiple characters multiple times, so it would have been maddening if

"FOR THE VARIOUS PLACE NAMES, MIKE TACKED RANDOM SYLLABLES TOGETHER UNTIL HE CAME UP WITH COMBINATIONS THAT SOUNDED RIGHT"



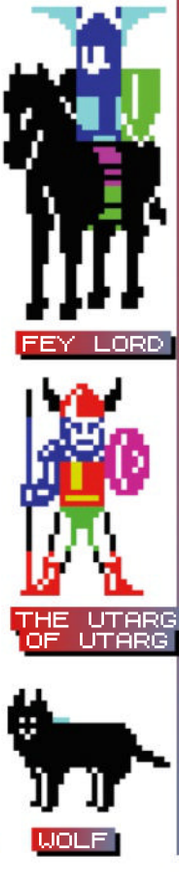
Morkin
He has found the Ice Crown. Less than seven hours of the day remain and Morkin is utterly invigorated. The Ice Fear is utterly cold. Morkin is very bold. He has with him the Ice Crown.
He thinks again....

» [ZX Spectrum] Having located the Ice Crown, you just need to work out how to destroy the damned thing.

the display had taken an age to update each time you looked and moved, akin to trudging through deep snow for real. In fact, Mike once revealed that his main impetus for Landscaping was Melbourne House's *The Hobbit* adventure game. He couldn't believe how long it took to draw the location images on the screen and knew he could do better.

Having dabbled in BASIC for a few days to make sure Landscaping was feasible, Mike then drew the map of Midnight, using Tolkien's Middle-earth maps as an inspiration. For the various place names, he simply tacked random syllables together until he came up with combinations that sounded right. He then spent three weeks writing the short, five-chapter story – the *Midnight Chronicles* – that established the scenario and would be included inside the lavish game package. Finally, with the map drawn up and the backstory in place, Mike spent the next seven months programming the game and bringing his world to life.

As he finessed the game, Mike's friend at Beyond, Terry Pratt, began generating excitement with a series of teaser ads. "Who are The Lords Of Midnight?" asked the first, in February 1984. A follow-up ad mentioned "Landscaping", another dropped that "Epic game" claim. The first review appeared in the 7 June 1984 issue of *Popular Computing Weekly* where it was ▶



EXPLORING MIDNIGHT

THE KEY LOCATIONS IN YOUR FIGHT AGAINST THE FOUL

TOWER OF THE MOON

This is where all campaigns and quests begin, at the tower surrounded by the Forest Of Shadows, situated in the south-west of Midnight. Standing alongside Luxor The Moonprince are his son Morkin and his key allies Rorthron The Wise and Corleth The Fey.

CITADEL OF XAJORKITH

This is the home of the free, hidden within the Mountains Of Corelay in the south of Midnight. If Xajorkith falls then Doomdark will have one hand on victory, so it's vital that you keep watch and resist any foul hordes that manage to make it this far south.

CITADEL OF USHGARAK

If you're looking to win the War Of The Solstice then your priority is to capture Doomdark's stronghold, which lies to the far north of Midnight in the Plains Of Despair. It's best to amass your armies at the nearby Citadel Of Ithrorn before marching west to seize Ushgarak.

TOWER OF DOOM

This is the location of the Ice Crown and your destination when attempting Morkin's quest. It lies at the northern tip of the map, beyond the Citadel Of Ushgarak, near to the Mountains Of Death. Lovely. To avoid detection, Morkin must approach the tower alone.

KEEP OF BLOOD

Situated in the Plains Of Blood, in the middle of the map, this is a strategic location for anyone attempting the popular 'Blood defence' strategy, where you attempt to repel Doomdark's forces as they pour south between the Mountains of Dodrak and Gorgrath.

» [iOS] The mobile version features a considered visual style that respects Mike's original 8-bit graphics.

DEVELOPER Q&A

CHRIS WILD HAS CONVERTED THE GAME TO MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

» Programmer Chris Wild first ported Lords to the PC back in 1991 as a curiosity project.

WHAT'S YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SERIES AND HOW DID YOU FIRST CONNECT WITH MIKE SINGLETON?

I used to play *Lords* and *Doomdark* when I was about 14, and a few years later, around 1990, I became interested in how they worked. I reverse engineered them and got them running on a 286 PC. I was going to make them available for people to play via FTP or some such, but I wanted Mike's permission. I was using some of the Usenet newsgroups and asked if anyone knew how I could contact him. Jon Ritman got in touch and passed on my request to Mike, who agreed. Then about 1994 I was working at SCi and a producer from Domark contacted me saying they were releasing *The Citadel* and that Mike thought it would be a great idea to include the DOS games to allow people to play them.

MOVING FORWARD, HOW DID THE MOBILE VERSION COME ABOUT?

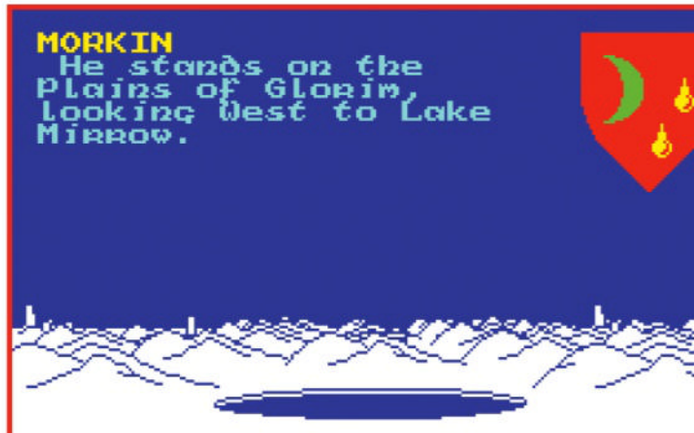
When the iPhone was first released, I knew it was a game-changer. The first thing that came to mind was developing *Lords* for it, so I contacted Mike and made the suggestion. Unfortunately, that suggestion lay dormant until Mike revisited the issue in 2011 and asked if I would like to collaborate on the game.

WAS THE PLAN TO FAITHFULLY RECREATE THE ORIGINAL GAME, JUST WITH IMPROVED VISUALS AND UPDATED CONTROLS?

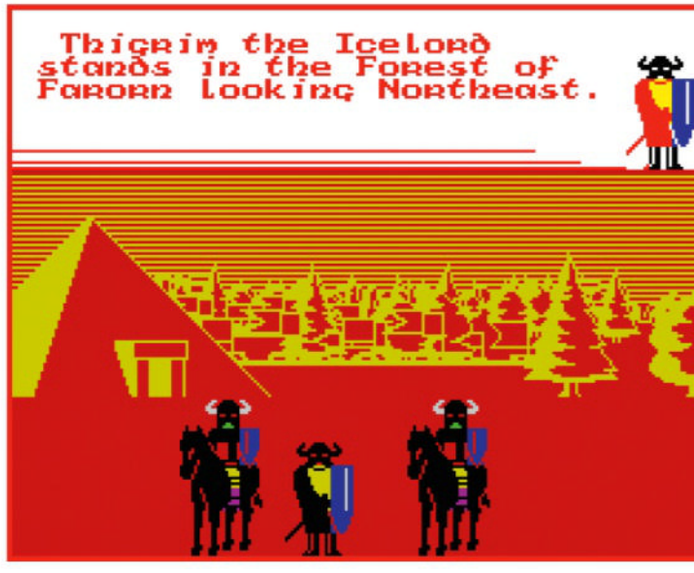
It was important to me that the game retained the iconic 2D Landscaping style and remained turn-based. *The Citadel* ultimately fails because of the bad transition to 3D and real-time gameplay. Once Mike and I had agreed on those two core requirements, we then started thinking about many aspects of the game that could or should be changed. After Mike died in 2012, none of those goals seemed to matter anymore, and I felt that it would be difficult for me to justify some of the design changes that we might have implemented, without Mike being there to help back them up. It was at this stage that I decided to release the game in the format that you now see it in, more of a tribute to Mike.

YOU PREVIOUSLY TOLD US THAT YOU WERE CONSIDERING AN UPDATE OF *THE CITADEL*, TO BRING IT MORE IN LINE WITH THE FIRST TWO GAMES…

I still am. I've been working on the water Landscaping routines but the process is slow. I've also been adding new features to *Lords* and *Doomdark* at the moment. This is the problem with doing this for fun and not for profit. If I could give up work things would be a lot quicker! Right now I'm thinking about next year being the 40th anniversary and how best to mark that. I'd like to think the release of *The Citadel* could be then, but it's more likely to be 2025.

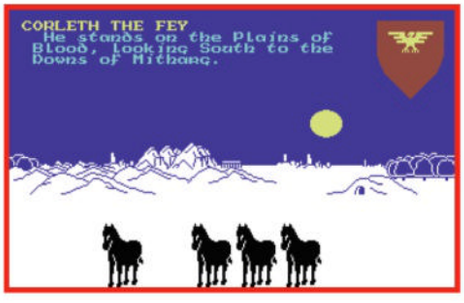


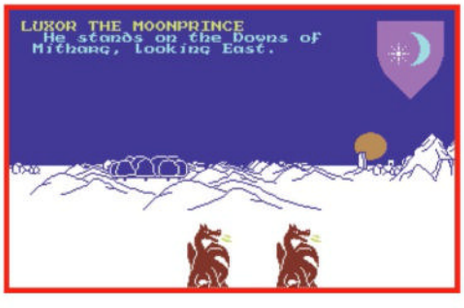
» [ZX Spectrum] Flinging the Ice Crown into Lake Mirrow is one way to end Doomdark's reign of tyranny.

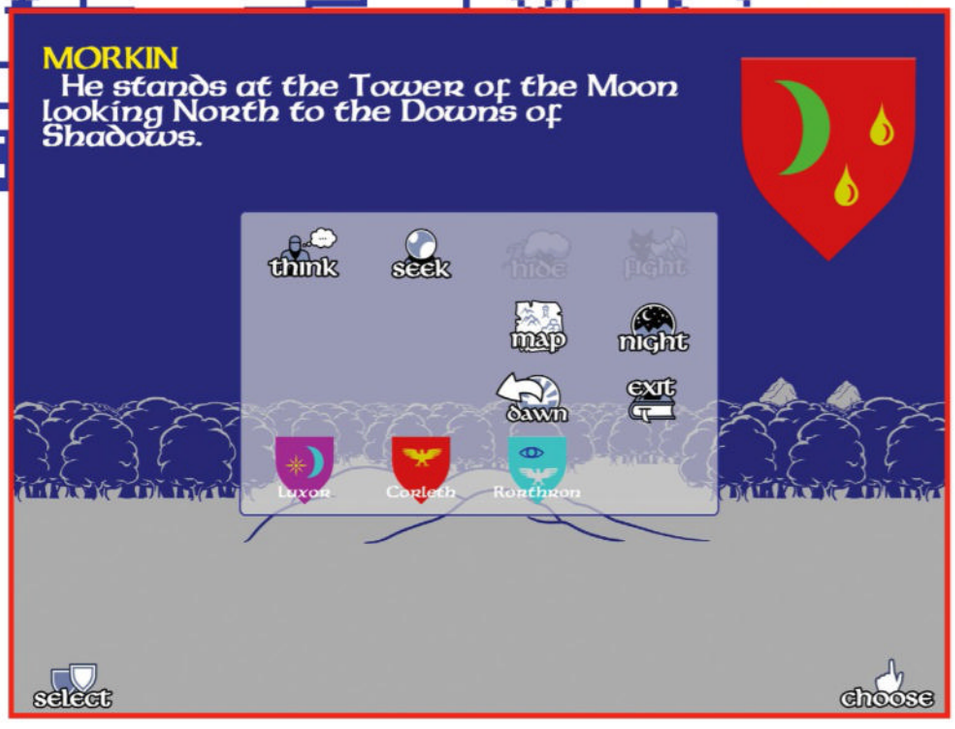


» [ZX Spectrum] *Doomdark's Revenge* introduced a little more variety and colour to its visual depictions.

The Utang of Utang
To the Northeast, Doomdark has an army of two hundred and fifty warriors and no riders. Two hundred and fifty warriors of the Doomguard guard the citadel. He thinks again....







» [iOS] The touch-screen controls are excellent, making the mobile version our preferred way to play.

awarded 'pick of the week' – although the critic did struggle to classify it. "The game is vaguely a war game and vaguely an adventure. To what extent it's a genuine adventure remains to be seen. Its claims as a strategy game are far more obvious and as such it must be one of the most sophisticated ever designed. Whatever you call it, it's great fun to play and technically brilliant." The following month, *Crash*, *CVG* and *Personal Computer Games* all awarded it 10/10, full marks. *Sinclair User* later called it, "One of the most extraordinary Spectrum games yet devised."

"COMMERCIALLY, BOTH GAMES ACHIEVED COMBINED SALES OF MORE THAN 200,000 COPIES, HELPING ESTABLISH BEYOND AS ONE OF THE UK'S PREMIER PUBLISHERS"

The success continued into 1985. The original game was converted to the Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64, with both versions picking up positive reviews, but the main event was the release of *Doomdark's Revenge*. Mike's sequel, which took place in the neighbouring land of Icemark, was bigger and more ambitious, and it too was a resounding hit with critics. Commercially, both games achieved combined sales of more than 200,000 copies, helping establish Beyond as one of the UK's premier publishers. This success was observed by Telecomsoft who bought out Beyond in late-1985 for a reported six-figure sum. One casualty of the acquisition was the proposed third game in the series, *The Eye Of The Moon*, which Mike mentioned in the original game's manual but abandoned it following a contract dispute with Beyond's new owners.

The Lords Of Midnight may be celebrating its 40th anniversary next year, but Luxor and his lords have never really gone away. Interest was reignited in 1991 when both games were included on *Crash* and *Zzap!64* covertapes, attracting a new generation of fans, and then again in 1995 when faithful PC ports of the two titles were bundled with a new 3D game in the series, *The Citadel*. Those ports were developed by Chris Wild who, following Mike's untimely passing in 2012, has acted as a custodian for the series. These days, Chris' elegant versions of *The Lords Of Midnight* and *Doomdark's Revenge* for desktop and mobile devices should be your go-to if you're thinking of exploring the epic worlds of Midnight and Icemark once more. And to that, we echo Mike by saying: *good luck go with you on your quest and fare thee well!*

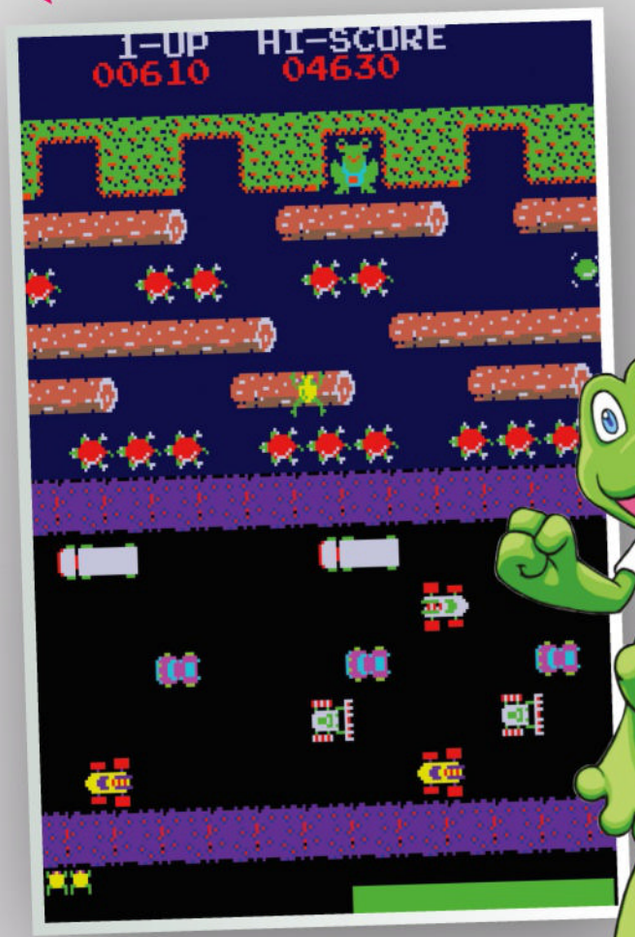
retro GAMER's FAVOURITE...

FROGS

On one recent rainy night, we found a frog on our front path. We left it to enjoy the weather, and instead got to thinking – there must be some brilliant frogs in the gaming world, right? So here are some of our favourites…

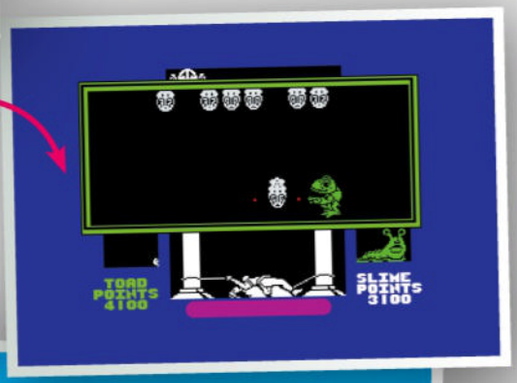
FROGGER

Let's start with the big guy on the scene – the amphibian antics of Konami's arcade game were hugely entertaining in the Eighties, and home computers were inundated with direct clones. In fact, a conversion of *Frogger* was the final Genesis release in North America. A late-Nineties revival saw Frogger hop into millions of homes once again, proving that this frog's got some legs.



COSMIC WARTOAD

All toads are frogs, but not all frogs are toads. Only one toad can claim the title of Cosmic Wartoad though, and it's this guy from Denton Designs, whose goal is to rescue his queen from the Slime King. If you want to try it, we've learned that this ZX Spectrum favourite was released on Steam for a fairly low price.



RASH, PIMPLE AND ZITZ

They may not be Cosmic Wartoads, but the Battletoads are well-known for tackling some of the toughest tasks of any NES action heroes. They hung around for a few years, crossing over with the *Double Dragon* lads and even making their way to the arcade, before starring in a genuinely funny comeback game that hit the Xbox One in 2020.

SCOOTER'S FROG

Players of *Ribbit King*, or its Japan-only predecessor *Kero Kero King*, will be familiar with the brilliant golf-like sport of Frolf, in which your goal is to launch frogs into holes. The main character Scooter has a little green frog, who is subjected to snake attacks, whirlpools, lightning strikes and more during games, so we can't help but admire his toughness.

PRINCE FLEASWALLOW

■ After PaRappa smashes up his dad's car, he needs to earn some money to replace it. Enter his new mentor Prince Fleaswallow, a laid-back frog who runs a stall at the flea market. Towards the end of the song he tells PaRappa that, "Money money money, is all you need," revealing his hardcore capitalist nature.

SUPERFROG

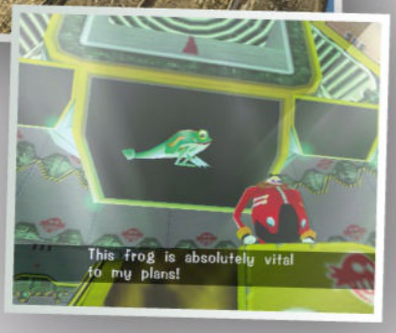
■ Team17's Amiga platform hero is an easy guy to relate to. He drinks Lucozade, wears a cape, runs really fast and has green skin, which basically describes all of Nick's weekend activities once he's taken off his human disguise. He had a brief HD comeback and the original game was on GOG for a bit, but he's disappeared again as of late.

SLIPPY

■ You may think that the perpetually imperilled member of the *Star Fox* team is a hindrance, what with him needing to be rescued all the time. Think about it this way – you're the star of an action film, and Slippy has been specifically cast to make you look good. Make sure you get around to thanking him after the credits roll.

FROGGY

■ If there's one thing we love about *Sonic Adventure*, it's Big The Cat's story. The confused cat must fish for his woefully wayward companion Froggy, a little guy who just wants to swim around all day but keeps getting accosted on account of having swallowed a Chaos Emerald. Because of this, he's grown a tail – no, we don't know either.



A TRIBUTE TO GREMLIN GRAPHICS

LATER KNOWN AS GREMLIN INTERACTIVE, SHEFFIELD'S FINEST SOFTWARE HOUSE QUICKLY ESTABLISHED ITSELF WITH A STRING OF 8-BIT HITS. JOIN RETRO GAMER AS WE CELEBRATE THE MOST NOTABLE GAMES FROM GREMLIN THROUGHOUT THE EIGHTIES AND INTO THE NINETIES

Words by Graeme Mason

Artwork by Wil Overton

Having met as colleagues at the electrical distributor Laskys, Ian Stewart and Kevin Norburn decided there was enough momentum in the home-computer industry to set up their own shop, Just Micro. The store became a magnet for young programming talent, and soon Ian and Kevin's ambitions exceeded the small building in Sheffield city centre.

Their dream began in 1984 with Gremlin Graphics. Having already secured the services of *Monty Mole* creator Peter Harrap, Gremlin moved swiftly in gaining a second programmer, Commodore 64 whiz Tony Crowther, as an independent developer. Tony's first game, *Percy The Potty Pigeon*, became Gremlin's debut before mega-hit *Wanted! Monty Mole* cemented the publisher's reputation.

A conveyor belt of high-quality 8-bit hits followed as Gremlin recognised (and often employed) the talent behind some of its best games, many curiously British in their themes and gameplay. *Monty Mole* embraced the politics of the time (albeit with its star as an innocent bystander, well, not entirely innocent) while games such as *Grumpy Gumphrey Supersleuth* and *Jack The Nipper*, revelled in the roles of a jobsworth security guard and naughty toddler, respectively.

As the inevitable licensed games crept in, Gremlin continued its role as a high-quality publisher, seldom releasing genuine clunkers. The new decade arrived, and a dedication to the established 16-bit formats, particularly the Amiga, strengthened Gremlin's position further, and it subsequently embraced the 32-bit era with trailblazing titles such as *Loaded* and *Actua Soccer*. The company grew as it acquired outside developers, such as Imagitec Design and DMA Design, before being bought by Infogrames in 1999. But it all kicked off in 1984 with that little mole.

IAN STEWART
» Ian Stewart cofounded Gremlin Graphics in the early Eighties. He now runs Urbanscan, which specialises in mobile games.

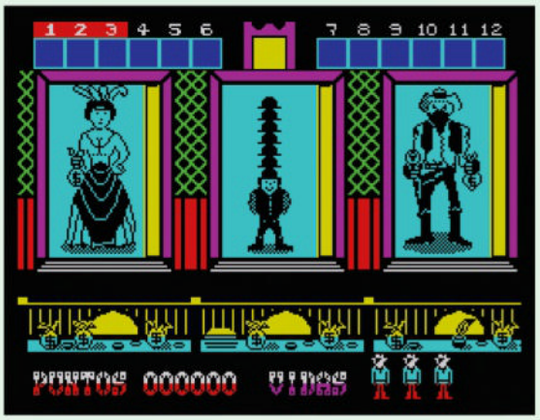
WANTED! MONTY MOLE

VARIOUS • 1984

■ Gremlin's first big release was also the first game in its most famous series – the saga of Monty Mole. Set during the Miner's Strike, the eponymous Talpidae is hunting for coal to warm his family. Bucket in paw, the furry fellow soon attracts the ire of picketing miners, the police and Arthur Scargill himself as he travels through the deviously plotted screens. *Wanted! Monty Mole* is a fine platform game and an excellent start for Gremlin.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"The first thing that springs to mind is the amount of news coverage we got for this game due to the fact we had an effigy of Arthur Scargill in the game! We actually offered to give the Miners' Welfare Fund 5p from every copy sold – but they declined. No idea why."



WEST BANK

VARIOUS • 1985

■ Once it had some games under its belt, Gremlin began to receive submissions from third-party developers, including Spanish outfit, Dinamic Software. After the rock-hard platformer *Abu Simbel Profanation* and boxing sim *Rocco* came this unsubtle *Bank Panic* clone that belies its derivative nature. Bloodthirsty cowboys have invaded the eponymous bank and are attempting to escape with its treasure. But the thieves haven't allowed for the law of the West – YOU! The building of the West Bank has 12 doors behind which lurk the villains or regular bank customers. Fail to shoot a baddie in time or gun down an innocent victim, and you'll lose one of your lives. Uncomplicated, yet fun and intuitive, *West Bank* is the most playable of Gremlin's Dinamic games.

From the end of the north road, the road points out across the silvery blue waters of the Lake of Tranquillity. A road follows the shore east and west as far as the eye can see.
RETRO GAMER ROCKS!

TINDERBOX

ZX SPECTRUM • 1985

■ *Tinderbox* represents a rare Gremlin foray into the realm of graphical text adventures. Another third-party game, Gremlin decided to contribute the game to the Soft Aid appeal, with all proceeds from its sale going to the Ethiopia Famine Relief Fund. Written in BASIC, it's a charming rescue-the-princess tale with workmanlike graphics, and *Tinderbox* is clearly aimed at younger adventurers. Its ease won it some favourable critical views, but sadly for the appeal, sales were low.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"That was a young couple that visited us, looking for a publisher. We probably took it on because we wanted to help them out. It didn't do very well, but we didn't really plan on making a lot of money from it – it was just about giving these people a chance."

FOR A GOOD CAUSE

MORE CLASSIC 8-BIT CHARITY RELEASES

THE OFFICIAL FATHER CHRISTMAS GAME

■ The Christmas of 1989 saw Alternative Software release this Santa-themed game. Collect pressies and deliver them on time, all in aid of the Save The Children Fund.

SOFT AID

■ This compilation represented superb value for money, retailing for just £4.99. All proceeds went to Bob Geldof's Ethiopian Appeal Fund. Best game: Elite's *Kokotoni Wilf.*

OFF THE HOOK

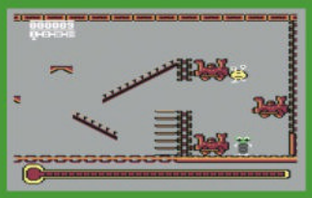
■ Rod Cousens followed up *Soft Aid* with a compilation supporting the Prince's Trust. Like *Soft Aid,* it has another brilliant David Rowe cover. Best game: *Kong Strikes Back* by Ocean.

WOW GAMES

■ This 1986 compilation supported War On Want, a campaign against all world poverty. It has an impressive count of 14 games. Best game: Ocean's *Hunchback 2.*

THE RACE AGAINST TIME

■ Codemasters joined the 8-bit charity trail with this £4.99 game from its Plus label in 1988. Created by the Oliver twins, the aim is to run the world in support of Sport Aid '88.



THING ON A SPRING

VARIOUS • 1985

■ The brainchild of Jason Perkins and Anthony Clarke, this cute platform puzzler sprung onto the Commodore 64 in the late summer of 1985. Starring a Zebedee-like character, the player bounces throughout a crazy factory, dodging enemies and collecting pieces of a jigsaw that holds the secret to defeating the mischievous evil Goblin. While critically well-received in the mid-Eighties, time has not been kind to *Thing On A Spring*. The main character's jump is frustrating, and enemies frequently tag themselves to Thing, ensuring a quick demise for the bouncy hero. It does, however, have a great Rob Hubbard tune and a sequel which is just as hard, if not harder. It it one of the few early Gremlin games not to appear on the ZX Spectrum.

MONTY ON THE RUN

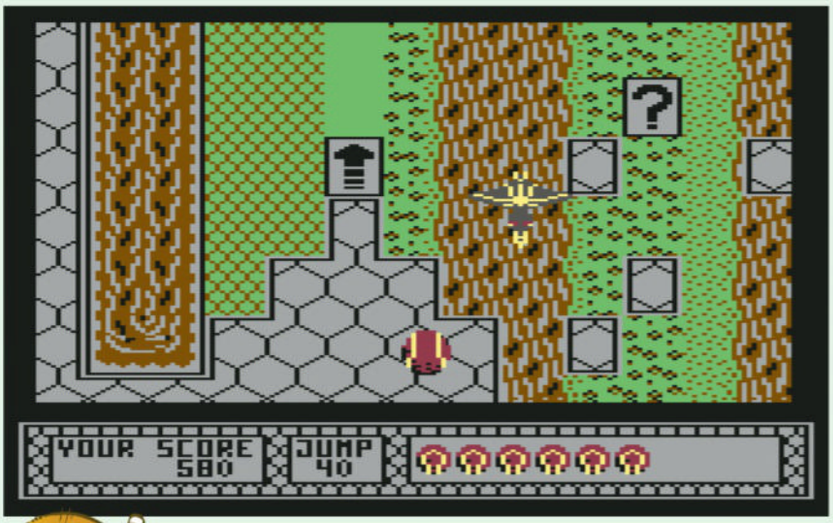
VARIOUS • 1985

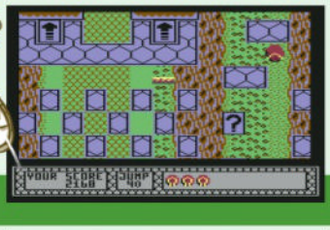
■ After the misstep of *Monty Is Innocent*, Gremlin charged the series' creator, Peter Harrap, with the next entry. Sprung from Scudmore Prison by his pal, Sam Stoat, Monty is, well, on the run and desperate to slip across the channel and escape the long arm of the law. After picking five items for his 'freedom kit', Monty journeys from his safe house to the sewers and the shores of England as he attempts to earn his freedom. Returning to the platform gameplay that made the original such a smash, *Monty On The Run* became the series' biggest hit to date, solidifying Monty's position as a genuine ZX Spectrum mascot. Amstrad CPC, C16 and C64 versions followed, the latter including a quite wonderful Rob Hubbard tune. Monty would return in *Auf Wiedersehen Monty* and *Impossamole*; for many, however, *Monty On The Run* is his greatest hour.

BOUNDER

VARIOUS • 1986

■ "It's B-b-b-bound to be a hit," ran the Gremlin advert, and it was accurate, at least when it came to critical acclaim. The trio of Chris Shrigley, Robert Toone and Andrew Green brought *Bounder* to Gremlin, and Ian Stewart recognised enough talent to justify hiring all three as in-house developers. *Bounder* is a classic ball-bouncing game, and while it may be a little more of a memory test than it needs to be, it's still an innovative experience with plenty of high-quality graphics and music, especially on the C64. A slightly easier remix, *Bounder On The Rebound* and a full sequel, *Re-Bounder*, followed.





IAN'S MEMORIES

"That was a game that was sent in to us by three guys based in Derby, Chris Shrigley, Robert Toone and Andrew Green. They were cracking guys, we agreed a publishing deal with them and then they joined the Gremlin team."

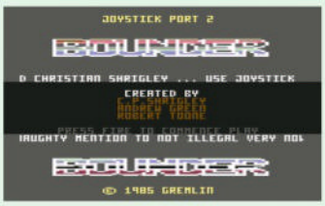
THE BOUNDER STORY BOUNCY BOUNDER FACTS

A ROUND DEBUT

■ *Bounder* was Chris, Robert and Andrew's first commercial game. The three were all friends from Derby, and the team also included artist Terry Lloyd.

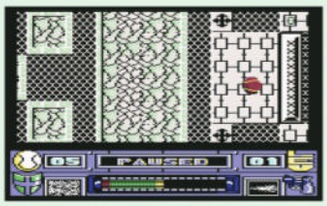
A GOOD CHOICE

■ The team also wanted to send the demo to Ocean but could only afford to send the package to one publisher. They (wisely) chose Gremlin.



A TEAM EFFORT

■ Andy and Chris programmed, Rob designed the maps before encoding them and inputting the data, while Terry designed sprites and, eventually, *Bounder*'s level graphics.



BOUNDER EVOLVES

■ *Bounder* began life as a parallax-scrolling demo before evolving into a *Marble Madness* clone and, finally, into the game we know and love today.

TRAILBLAZER

VARIOUS • 1986

The expert C64 coder and artist team Shaun Southern and Andrew Morris had already proved themselves with numerous budget releases throughout the mid-Eighties. Working as Mr Chip Software (which would morph into Magnetic Fields in 1988), the pair debuted at Gremlin with this fun bouncing ball game that, while inevitably drawing comparisons with *Bounder*, was another original and critical hit. At its heart, *Trailblazer* is a racing game, the player charging across the chequered grid as quickly as possible. Colourful, smart and fast, *Trailblazer* particularly shone in its fantastic two-player mode. Another playable Gremlin game, especially on the C64.

> **IAN'S MEMORIES**
>
> That was Magnetic Fields, Shaun Southern and Andrew Morris. Again, great guys. Shaun was the coding talent, and Andrew was the artist. That game led to quite a long-term relationship with Magnetic Fields, and *Trailblazer* was one of my favourite games – even if it didn't do as well as I thought it could have done. To this day, I don't know why – maybe it was the lack of a real character, something for the player to embrace.

JACK THE NIPPER

VARIOUS • 1986

All work and no play make Jack a dull baby. The solution? Well, being of a rather naughty disposition, wander around his town and cause some chaos, mixed in with a hefty dose of mischief. In this novel game from Greg Holmes, the player controls a nefarious child, pea-shooter in hand, as they ingeniously terrorise the locals. By gluing the teeth in the molar factory, petrifying an innocent pussycat with a horn, and freeing prisoners from the police station, this toddler can cause untold trouble. Once Jack's Naughtyometer reaches 100%, his work here is done, but watch out for that nappy rash: should the errant tot receive too many spankings, it's back home and game over. Wonderfully inventive, delightfully British and simply fun to play, *Jack The Nipper* is an outstanding game across all formats.

> **IAN'S MEMORIES**
>
> Greg Holmes had partially written *Jack The Nipper* when he brought it to us. We then brought him in-house to get it finished. He went on to do *Jack The Nipper II*, and it was the way we were building at the time, by bringing in these very talented people.

THE WAY OF THE TIGER

VARIOUS • 1986

The *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks' success inspired a slew of imitators in the Eighties, and this ninja-focussed series of books by Mark Smith and Jamie Thompson was a decent, if short-lived, contribution to the genre. The books became one of Gremlin's first licences, its team of Peter Harrap, Chris Kerry and Shaun Hollingworth producing a technically superb beat-'em-up infused with various elements from the source material. Under the watchful eye of your god, Kwon, the player trains and practises in multiple forms of combat before taking on three tests and qualifying as a ninja. Well-received on the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC, *The Way Of The Tiger*'s three-level parallax scrolling still impresses today, and a sequel, *Avenger*, followed, in which the ninja gets to test their skills for real.

> **IAN'S MEMORIES**
>
> A guy called Mark Smith was the author. We used the popularity of his gamebooks to run a licence off the back of them. They were interesting games technically, such as the masking techniques in *The Way Of The Tiger*. The second one, *Avenger*, had a nice forced 3D perspective, and they were reasonably successful.

THE WAY OF THE TRIVIA

COOL FACTS ABOUT THE WAY OF THE TIGER

A SIMPLE CALL

In order to obtain *The Way Of The Tiger* licence, Gremlin boss Ian Stewart simply called Hodder & Stoughton, the publisher of the popular gamebook series.

TRIPLE-SCROLL

The Way Of The Tiger's scrolling was dubbed Triple-Scroll. Chris Kerry nicknamed it Trigeminal Scrolling. The Trigeminal nerve is the part of the body that controls chewing.

ANIMATED DEVELOPMENT

Gremlin's Shaun Hollingworth devised a system to compress the game's graphics, enabling the complex animations of both the ninja and their enemies.

WARHAMMER INFLUENCE

The team created most of the main characters around *Warhammer* miniatures, the small lead figurines helping them to judge proportions more accurately.

THE DREADED MULTILOAD

Nevertheless, *The Way Of The Tiger* was an early Spectrum multiloader, thanks to the graphics, animations and copious off-screen calculations that didn't fit into 48K.

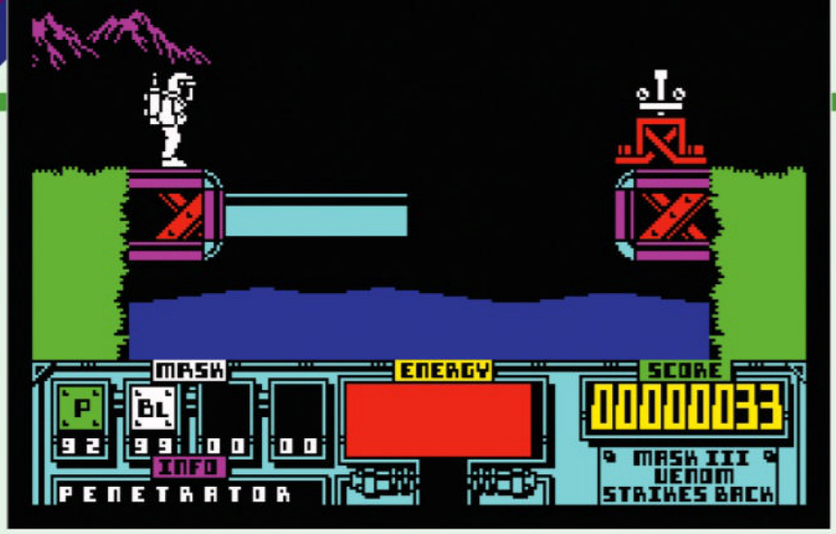
BUDGET SUCCESS

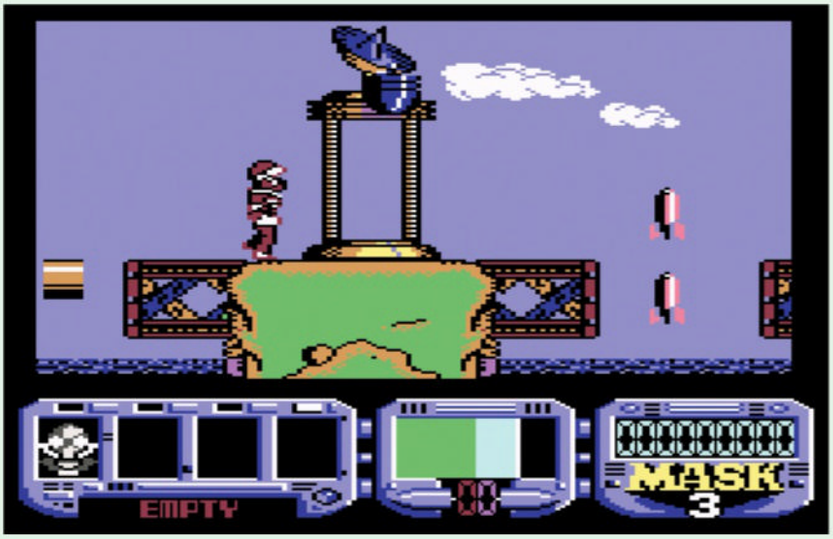
Originally retailing on tape for £9.99, *The Way Of The Tiger* eventually found its way on to US Gold's budget label Kixx. That version is still cheap to buy today.

MASK: VENOM STRIKES BACK

VARIOUS • 1988

■ Standing for Mobile Armored Strike Kommand, *MASK* was a French-American cartoon based upon a range of toys from Kenner, a path previously forged by Mattel and its *Masters Of The Universe* range. The first and second games appeared in quick succession during 1987 to a mixed reception, the Spectrum and Amstrad versions generally well-received against a wall of apathy on the C64, save for Ben Daglish's excellent tune work. This third game ditches the numeral in its title, opting for the dramatic subtitle, *VENOM Strikes Back*, and the change seemed to work with strong scores across the formats. In its uncomplicated plot, MASK's Matt Trakker is back, and this time it's personal. Miles Mayhem and his dastardly organisation, VENOM (Vicious Evil Network Of Mayhem), has kidnapped Trakker's son, Scott. The hero faces a terrible choice: surrender the forces of MASK to VENOM or lose his child. Similar to Hewson's *Exolon*, this colourful run-and-gun ends the series on a high note, especially on the ZX Spectrum.

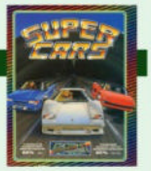




> IAN'S MEMORIES
>
> We dealt with a licensing agency for this, so we didn't really get under the skin of the licence. But as a result, we didn't have many restrictions bar the normal ones, like following the mood of the original cartoon.

SUPER CARS

VARIOUS • 1990



■ As the world ticked over to the Nineties, Gremlin shifted its focus to the 16-bit computers together with its developer Magnetic Fields. Inspired by the top-down arcade racer, *Super Sprint*, *Super Cars* employs Shaun Southern and Andrew Morris' usual high level of presentation, coupled with some slick gameplay and a neat multiplayer mode as players compete in races for cash prizes. *Super Cars*' impressive range of upgrades, tracks and options ensured its continued position as one of the Commodore Amiga's premier top-down racers, and its success led to a sequel, *Super Cars II*, in 1991. Passable 8-bit versions, including a Nintendo Entertainment System port in 1991, also followed, and these inevitably reduced the number of tracks and cars. Nevertheless, it's another fine Gremlin/Magnetic Fields collaboration.

> IAN'S MEMORIES
>
> The Magnetic Fields guys produced some really good games there, probably the most liked of all our 16-bit games, even if they were a bit of a riff on *Super Sprint*. Really polished games.

LOTUS ESPRIT TURBO CHALLENGE

VARIOUS • 1990

■ Magnetic Fields and Gremlin raced to the victory podium in 1990 with this supreme driving game based around the eponymous British racing car. Full of technical innovation and the now-familiar two-player mode, *Lotus Esprit Turbo Challenge* takes place over 32 tracks, each offering hazards, sharp turns, hills and an incredible impression of speed that was unrivalled at the time. Graphically, *Lotus* takes the template set down by famous arcade racers such as *Out Run*, adding some of the smoothest animation seen in the 16-bit generation. Boasting more fabulous Ben Daglish tune-smithery, perhaps the only drawback to *Lotus Esprit* is its windowed one-player mode – but against a mate, this remains pure racing perfection. *Lotus Turbo Challenge 2* and *Lotus III: The Ultimate Challenge* followed in 1991 and 1992, respectively.

HEROQUEST

VARIOUS • 1991

Gremlin turned its licensing powers to Hasbro and its fantasy board game, *HeroQuest*, in 1991. The result, an isometric RPG action adventure hybrid, pleased most reviewers and remains an entertaining slice of violent mystical gaming. The player selects one of four characters, wizard, elf, barbarian or dwarf, each with their own particular set of skills – and weaknesses. The devious evil wizard Morcar is the target, with the computer taking on this role. Throughout the quest, the players roll virtual dice to move and decide the outcome of battles against Morcar's army. Gremlin made sure *HeroQuest*'s multiplayer mode is where the game truly shines – truthfully, like the board game, it's not much fun alone. An 8-bit expansion, *Return Of The Witch Lord* and a proper 16-bit sequel, *Legacy Of Sorasil*, followed.

> **IAN'S MEMORIES**
>
> That was Hasbro, and we also did *Space Crusade* for them. They were really enjoyable games to work on, and we got a lot of input from Hasbro itself, as they were quite focussed on the quality of the end product.

HEROQUEST ACROSS THE REALM

RETRO GAMER COMPARES FOUR DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF HEROQUEST

ZX SPECTRUM

While its tape versions employ a rather painful multiloader, this is still a solid interpretation of the board game. Had it been released five years earlier, it'd be renowned as a Speccy classic.

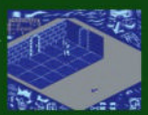
AMIGA

With its evocative intros and colourful graphics, the Amiga game is undoubtedly the most impressive visually. It plays well, too, and like the other versions, is best enjoyed with company.

PC

The bare bones of the RPG are exposed on a format renowned for complexity, but that doesn't mean there isn't fun here for the undemanding – ie younger – PC player.

AMSTRAD CPC



Another Spectrum port, but one particularly suited to the Amstrad computer, offering plenty of depth and gameplay for new RPG fans. A tad disappointing graphically, but a decent offering.

SWITCHBLADE II

VARIOUS • 1991

Formed from several Gremlin employees, Core Design had already enjoyed great success by 1991 with *Rick Dangerous* and the original *Switchblade*. Set several centuries after the first game, *Switchblade II* focusses on a descendent of *Switchblade*'s hero, once more called upon to thwart the demon Havok. *Switchblade II*'s sleek and attractive display complements its cyberpunk themes perfectly, and while the game received criticism for its difficulty, Core Design and Gremlin did a good job of realising their desire for an arcade-type experience on the 16-bit computers. Coder George Allan had already impressed with *Venus: The Fly Trap*, but his most significant moment was yet to come.

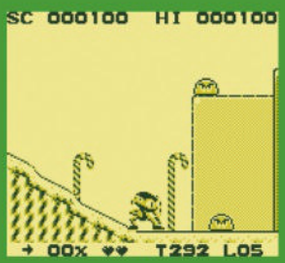
> **IAN'S MEMORIES**
>
> Core Design spun out of the Gremlin offices in Derby, so we knew all the guys. They used the same engine as they'd used on *Rick Dangerous*, but that meant they could turn these products around fairly quickly.

PREMIER MANAGER

VARIOUS • 1992

Remember Kevin Toms' *Football Manager*? Well, so does Ian Stewart, and in 1992 Gremlin released *Premier Manager*, bringing an accessible and attractive sheen to the 8-bit management classic. *Premier Manager* plummets the player into the world of high-pressure soccer management, starting in the lower echelons of the English football pyramid. From controlling ground improvements, finances, transfers and team selection, it offers a wealth of options as you attempt to guide your lowly club into the top division. Once a match has commenced, the game keeps you updated on who has possession while a small window displays highlights. *Premier Manager* is far from the most complex of management simulations, but its accessibility ensured popularity, and Gremlin continued to publish the series up until *Premier Manager: Ninety Nine*.

> **IAN'S MEMORIES**
>
> Another game that dropped through the letterbox, and we ended up doing one every year! We tried to make it a game you could come in and out of rather than taking a lot of time to set up and manage games. It was very successful: the last one we did was *Premier Manager 2012*.



ZOOL

VARIOUS • 1992

Fast, frantic and exuberant, this is the tale of the mysterious Ninja from the Nth Dimension, stranded far from its home planet. Zool races across a series of weird locations to reach its destination, each occupied with equally weird inhabitants. Stung by (unfair) criticism of his earlier game, *Switchblade II*, programmer George Allan focussed his efforts on creating a notably faster experience on the Commodore Amiga, and the Gremlin marketing machine made sure everybody knew about *Zool*. Multiple versions appeared over the 16-bit computers and consoles, as did a sequel in 1993.

> IAN'S MEMORIES
>
> *Zool* was by far our biggest game. George [Allan] came down from Scotland and joined us, finishing a game called *Venus: The Flytrap*. We spent loads of time with him and Ade Carless working on the character and gameplay. They were great guys, and there's a common theme here: most of the people who worked for us, we just got on great with and had a good time.

MORE ZOOL

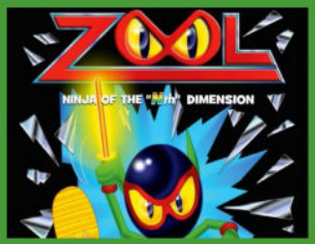
ZANY ZOOL FACTS

SCROLL LIFE

Zool began life as a scrolling routine that was written for *Switchblade II*, before being considerably sped up for the crazy-fast platformer.

AN AMIGA PROJECT

Zool was initially just a Commodore Amiga game, as Gremlin hedged its bets. Its subsequent success meant more platforms followed.



TRIPLE LOOK

The game's eponymous character initially had three eyes. One eye was removed early in development, which helped the box design.

MARKETING MIGHT

Gremlin's marketing department came up with the idea of licensing Chupa Chups lollipops for *Zool*'s first level. It also used adverts to target Sega's *Sonic The Hedgehog*.

SHADOW FIGHTER

VARIOUS • 1995

Throughout the Nineties, Gremlin continued to publish games from third-party developers. This beat-'em-up was the first game from Sicilian developer NAPS Team, formed by Fabio Capone and Domenico Barba in 1993. Inspired by arcade legends such as *Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat*, *Shadow Fighter* offers multiple locations and fighters welded to a limp tournament plot centred on the evil titular combatant. Each of the 16 fighters has a range of powerful attacks and a special elemental move. Italian Toni harnesses the power of fire in a flame kick while the Japanese Okura wields an electric sword, inevitably inciting memories of *Mortal Kombat*'s Raiden. But the focal point of fighting games is their combat mechanisms, and for Amiga fans disappointed by Team17's *Body Blows* and the execrable *Rise Of The Robots*, *Shadow Fighter* represents one of the pinnacles of the beat-'em-up genre on the Commodore computer. Derivative but highly polished, *Shadow Fighter* makes an admirable fist at nabbing the *Street Fighter II* crown on the Amiga.

ACTUA SOCCER

VARIOUS • 1995

By 1995, the *FIFA* behemoth was already beginning its worldwide domination of the action football game – Gremlin became one of its few commercial competitors with this groundbreaking series that spawned a whole league of *Actua*-themed games. Pool, golf, hockey and tennis all followed, yet soccer is where it started, and *Actua Soccer*'s use of a full 3D engine, together with proper 3D players, motion-captured likenesses of Sheffield Wednesday legends Andy Sinton, Graham Hyde and Chris Woods, set new boundaries for the genre. Critically, it plays well, too, with realistic player movements and a focus on attacking. A solid selection of customisable competitions, options and commentary from the BBC's Barry Davies completes a good package that inspired several further *Actua Soccer* games.

> IAN'S MEMORIES
>
> This was the start of games that required more resources, bigger teams and dedication. We ended up with our own motion-capture studio, and I think it was the first sports game to use motion capture.

LOADED

VARIOUS • 1995

Despite missing out on launch-title status, *Loaded* is one of the PlayStation's first third-party games. Imagine Atari's *Gauntlet*, dragged into the future and imbued with some of the craziest and meanest player characters of all time, and you've got a fair idea of *Loaded*'s gameplay. The characters' look was designed by Gremlin's Les Spink and Adrian Carless, alongside 2000 AD artist Greg Staples, so it was no surprise to see the manic game inspire a series of *Loaded* comics, ostensibly as a promotional tool by Gremlin. The chief enemy of *Loaded* is FUB (Fat Ugly Boy), and as one of the six bizarre characters, the player pursues the genetically engineered FUB across the galaxy. A bloody game full of mayhem and destruction, *Loaded* fit perfectly into Sony's plan of thrusting gaming into a more mature audience. A sequel, *Re-Loaded*, appeared in 1996 and features just as much if not more, senseless violence.

> IAN'S MEMORIES
>
> It was a time when people were enjoying the violence in videogames! But what I loved about [*Loaded*] was the characters. They were wonderfully thought-out and illustrated by *2000 AD* artist Greg Staples.

FRAGILE ALLEGIANCE

PC • 1996

Having already released the real-time strategy games *Utopia: The Creation Of A Nation* and the underrated Amiga gem, *K240*, Gremlin shifted further into PC territory with this brilliant revamp of the latter, incorporating better graphics and a friendlier UI to the existing gameplay. Essentially an empire-building title in the vein of *Master Of Orion*, the player builds up a mining operation while forging alliances with or against the six alien races. Published as part of a deal between Gremlin and the American company Interplay, *Fragile Allegiance*, like so many Gremlin games, again displayed some noteworthy technological advances, specifically the use of facial motion-capture techniques to help the player guess their opposition's intentions during testy negotiations. Massively in-depth and requiring vast amounts of time-consuming micromanagement once your facility blossomed (those corporate taskmasters are never satisfied, it seems), the game found its natural home on PC. The fragility of the title is represented eloquently by the fossilised cadaver on the cover of the European release, an image that attracted controversy at the time. The North American release omitted the figure.

BODY HARVEST

NINTENDO 64 • 1998

Having acquired DMA in 1996, Gremlin inherited this troubled sci-fi adventure when Nintendo went cold. It's a pioneering game that lays the foundations for DMA's future success with *Grand Theft Auto* – but something of a curio today, its large vistas empty and devoid of features. Nevertheless, *Body Harvest* represents a critical step in the constantly evolving landscape of videogames, setting the industry off on the open-world path.

> IAN'S MEMORIES
>
> We got that because we acquired DMA Design up in Dundee. At the time, they were working on *Grand Theft Auto* for BMG and *Body Harvest* for Nintendo, who subsequently didn't want it. It didn't do great, but they were a talented bunch of people.

A GREMLIN IN THE WORKS

MARK HARDISTY'S EXHAUSTIVE GUIDE TO THE SOUTH YORKSHIRE SOFTWARE HOUSE IS AVAILABLE AGAIN

Back in 2016, author Mark Hardisty and publisher Bitmap Books released the hefty double-tome *A Gremlin In The Works*. Featuring hours of interviews with Gremlin alumni and freelancers, it's an exhaustive look back at one of the UK's biggest and most resilient software houses. The two books break down into different eras: book one covers the 8-bit years, from 1983 to 1989, while book two moves into the Nineties and beyond. As usual with Bitmap Books, everything is presented highly professionally, and there's a massive amount of Gremlin-related info to absorb. Bitmap Books has recently added more stock of *A Gremlin In The Works* – head over to bitmapbooks.com to learn more.

-58

American Gladiators

"FROM UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD..."

» MEGA DRIVE » 1992 » IMAGITEC DESIGN

If there was anything that could drag me away from the consoles as a kid, it was *Gladiators*. It was more than a TV show – it was an essential part of Saturday nights in my family, and an obsession for me personally. I had the sticker album, I had the toys, and we went to the opening of my local Blockbuster Video just to see the stars of the show. Since my karate dojo was in the same sports centre as Ace's gym, I'd often see if I could spot him after classes. I was even aware of the show's American origins prior to the international series, as I had the *American Gladiators* Joust set before the UK toy line was released.

Knowing all that, you can probably imagine my excitement when I saw *Sega Pro*'s review of *American Gladiators* – as well as my disappointment at the prospect of it being a bit of a duffer. I didn't get to try it for myself until long after Wolf, Lightning and company had left the spotlight, but I had to agree with that review when I finally did. There are some surprisingly faithful aspects of the presentation, but events like Atlaspheres and Power Ball are depicted with tiny play areas that don't capture the spectacle of the show, while Joust looks the part but feels too fiddly to control.

I'm sure the *Gladiators* franchise offers the potential for a great multi-sport game in the style of *Track & Field*, in part because Konami itself did a great job of adapting similar Japanese shows like *Muscle Ranking* and *Sasuke* in the Nineties. I doubt that we'll ever see that potential realised though – apart from officially licensed Olympic Games tie-ins, those sorts of games are pretty rare these days. I'll just have to wait in hope, and as I've recently discovered the official *American Gladiators* YouTube channel, I won't get bored doing so.

THE UNCONVERTED

Arcade games that never made it home

PLANET HARRIERS

DEVELOPER: **AMUSEMENT VISION** YEAR: **2000** GENRE: **ON-RAILS SHOOTER**

■ We're all huge fans of *Space Harrier* here at Retro Gamer, which makes this series entry one of our most unfortunate The Unconverted titles. It might well be the 'King Of The Unconverted' for us, especially as it was a rare sight to see in arcades when it was released. If you *were* lucky enough to find it, you'd discover an opulent two-player coin-op, running on Sega's powerhouse Hikaru arcade hardware, that was as visually remarkable as *Space Harrier* appeared back in 1985.

The pain of missing out is softened when you realise that the game doesn't actually have much in common with the *Space Harrier* series. Yes, it's set in a fantasy/sci-fi world and you get to zoom around the screen shooting enemies, alternating between running and flying. And yes, there are a bunch of outlandish screen-filling bosses waiting for you at the end of each stage. But the gameplay is closer to console rail shooters like *Panzer Dragoon* and *Lylat Wars*. It also features a shooting/targeting system similar to one in *After Burner*, where you can fire your guns at enemies and also lock-on to multiple targets and then take them all out with a flurry of missiles. The main 'Harrier' character from the previous games is also missing, replaced by four madcap new heroes – plus Opa-Opa from *Fantasy Zone* can also be unlocked.

It was widely rumoured that the game was Dreamcast bound, and then heading to the GameCube following the successful release of Amusement Vision's *Super Monkey Ball*. The game's producer Toshihiro Nagoshi claimed a conversion was under consideration, but nothing ever materialised, so for most people the only way to experience the game these days is via an imperfect emulation solution.

■ Here lies your stock of 'Big Bombs', which destroy all regular on-screen enemies. In the case of bosses, each bomb blasts away a good chunk of its health.

■ The first boss you encounter is Valcandra, a six-headed beastie. Target each head in turn to chip away at its health bar – and note the imposed time limit.

■ As you target enemies you'll burn through your Lock-On Fuel, so you need to repeatedly fire and retarget. A larger fuel container can be purchased from the in-game shop.

■ Hold down the missile button and hover over incoming enemies to lock-on to multiple targets, then release the button to unleash merry hell.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

GALAXY FORCE II

1988

■ Featuring the same on-rails action and a similar targeting system, this Y-Board space shooter is a close cousin to *Planet Harriers*. Released at a time when every Sega coin-op was optioned for the home, it was converted to numerous systems.

SUPERMAN

DEVELOPER: **TAITO** YEAR: **1988** GENRE: **ACTION**

■ **Considering he was the original comic-book superhero, Superman has a terrible track record when it comes to videogame adaptations.** Apart from Sunsoft's two Mega Drive games, there's nothing to write home to Krypton about. It's a shame then that this Taito arcade game is not better known, as it was never converted to any home system (no doubt due to some tedious licensing issue).

This is no brooding take on the character. Supes flies around the screen, kicking baddies into oblivion and punching helicopters out of the sky, on a quest to defeat a space alien named Emperor Zaas. That's definitely not canon, and neither is the red-suited Superman who joins the action in co-op mode. Anyway, this is the perfect game for any kid who watched *Superman III* and wished they could actually play the 'game' seen at the end of the movie, as the shoot-'em-up sections are clearly inspired by it.

» [Arcade] Superman and his dubious doppelgänger take to the skies to defeat the evil Emperor Zaas.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

BATMAN FOREVER

1996

■ If you like DC brawlers then this movie tie-in is well worth a look. Playing as Batman and Robin, two players cut a swathe through Gotham's mean streets. Following its arcade debut it was ported to PC, PlayStation and Saturn.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

SPY HUNTER

1983

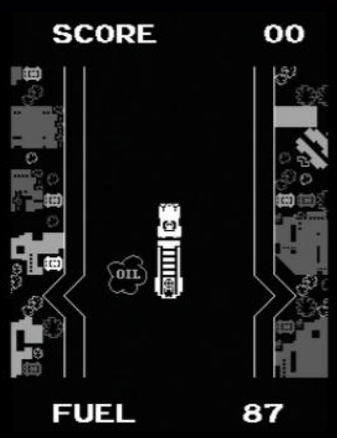
■ If Atari's *Super Bug* and *Fire Truck* pioneered the top-down driving game, Bally Midway's *Spy Hunter* was a generational leap forward thanks to the addition of vehicular combat elements. Cue the *Peter Gunn* theme and hit the streets.

FIRE TRUCK

DEVELOPER: **ATARI** YEAR: **1978** GENRE: **DRIVING**

■ **This is a sweet little game from Atari's archives that was designed by Howard Delman, building on his earlier *Super Bug* game.** You're tasked with guiding a fire truck through twisting streets, avoiding obstacles like parked cars and, that videogame favourite, the random oil slick. The aim is to travel as far as possible before your fuel runs out, so you never actually arrive at a blazing building – but seeing as the graphics are greyscale, that's possibly no great shame.

Fire Truck can be played in single-player, but its appeal lies in its early adoption of co-op play. The original coin-op featured two steering wheels, allowing one person to steer the cab and the other the trailer. Trying to work together to avoid crashes is a lot of fun. We could imagine this game working a treat on the Atari VCS, but it wasn't to be – and it would remain that way until 2018, when the game was finally featured on an Atari *Flashback Classics* collection.



» [Arcade] Watch out for that troublemaker Norman Price as your travel around Pontypandy.

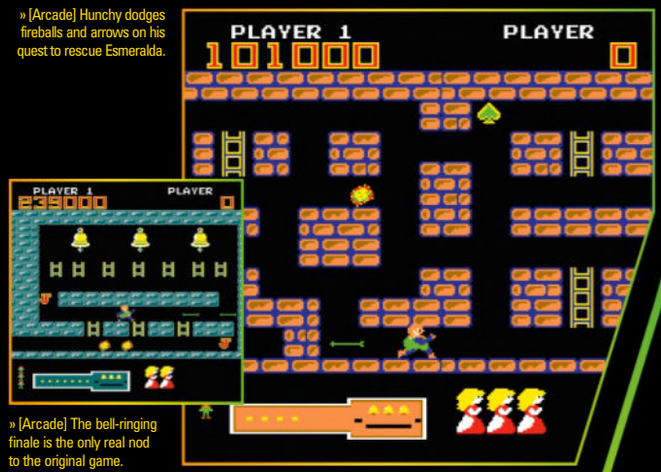
BEST LEFT IN THE ARCADE

HERO

DEVELOPER: **CENTURY** YEAR: **1983** GENRE: **MAZE GAME**

■ **No, this has nothing to do with John Van Ryzin's classic rescue game.** In this case, *HERO* stands for Hunchback Esmeralda Rescue Operation, which identifies it as a sequel of sorts to Century's *Hunchback* coin-op. Seeing that everyone ripped off the original title, Century returned the favour by borrowing heavily from Konami's *Tutankham* and various other scrolling maze games. Only the final screen, which involves a visit to the castle's tower to ring the bells, ties it to the original.

The third and final game in the loose series, *Hunchback Olympic*, was an ill-advised take on *Track & Field*, but that was converted to the C64 so we can skip that. Probably for the best. *HERO* is not an awful game by any means, but it was always a lazy cash-in that was best left at the back of the arcade to gather cobwebs.



» [Arcade] Hunchy dodges fireballs and arrows on his quest to rescue Esmeralda.

» [Arcade] The bell-ringing finale is the only real nod to the original game.

THE MAKING OF XENOCRISIS

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** BITMAP BUREAU
- **DEVELOPER:** BITMAP BUREAU
- **RELEASED:** 2019 - 2023
- **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** SHOOTER

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

88 HEROES (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 2017

NINJA SHODOWN
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 2017

FINAL VENDETTA
SYSTEM: PC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 2022

WHEN XENO CRISIS LANDED ON THE MEGA DRIVE IN 2019, CREATOR BITMAP BUREAU PROVED A LOT COULD BE DONE WITH SEGA'S AGEING SYSTEM. WE CAUGHT UP WITH STUDIO COFOUNDER MIKE TUCKER TO UNPICK THE MAKING OF THE TEAM'S GREATEST WORK

WORDS BY WILL FREEMAN

When Mike Tucker and Matt Cope founded Bitmap Bureau seven years ago, they set a confidently straightforward plan in place. The longstanding friends weren't looking to revolutionise the cutting edge of contemporary AAA gaming, or even wildly reinvent retro genres for new modern audiences.

» Mike Tucker joined the games industry in 1995, before cofounding Bitmap Bureau in 2016, with a view to building games that are authentic to retro-design principles.

"It's a bit of a cliche, but I just wanted to make games that appeal to me," reveals Mike, Bitmap Bureau design director and cofounder. "Since I was a kid, I've had ideas for games in my head and I've carried some of those from my younger years. So Bitmap Bureau was really about making things that Matt and I enjoy making and would enjoy playing in the hope that other people would also enjoy them."

That understated assertion of Bitmap Bureau's founding, however, belies the remarkable quality of the team's work, and Mike's own rich history in the gaming industry. He joined the realm as a tester for SCi Games way back in 1995, before moving into the likes of level design at the outfit that would ultimately get scooped up by *Final Fantasy* firm Square Enix. He also worked in the very early days of mobile games back in 2000, initially at IOMO and later at InfoGames, serving as a game designer and programmer. None of those experiences, however, quite scratched the itch that told Mike he should be making games like those he loved as a youngster, in the classic era of home and arcade gaming.

With that dream in mind, he founded Megadev games in 2008, making successful retro-inspired titles that were picked up by then high-profile publishers including Adult Swim. Megadev marked a huge stride in the right direction for Mike, and yet still he longed to be making games that were more authentic to the medium's past – and his own.

So when he got a call from Matt Cope, who wanted to bring his programming, porting and electrical engineering skills back to gaming after a hiatus, he knew it was time to commit to those long-present voices telling him to make games like those he cherished as an arcade-obsessed youngster. And so it was that Matt and Mike established Bitmap Bureau, back in the early weeks of 2016. And that straightforward plan? They wanted to make authentic modern retro games, with the freedom of true independence.

"Generally, I was a massive fan of Capcom, Konami, Sega and Namco back in the Eighties and Nineties," Mike offers. "I've always loved Japanese developers, and at Bitmap Bureau we try to get as close to them as we can, in terms of adhering to their design principles and philosophies in many ways. Obviously we bring a sort of a UK and European slant to it. But we do try to get close to those classic Japanese game's look and feel." More generally, we just want to make high-quality pixel games. We try to add something new to each genre

» [Mega Drive] The game's melee attacks evoke the high-scoring move from Saurus' *Shock Troopers*.

» [Mega Drive] Each new area introduces yet more enemies to learn how to counter.

THE SPAWNING

INSIDE XENO CRISIS' EXTENSIVE MULTIPLATFORM JOURNEY

While *Xeno Crisis* was born on the Mega Drive, it soon made the journey to numerous other systems, including the Neo Geo MVS and AES, Neo Geo CD, Dreamcast, Evercade, GameCube and N64. It's also appeared on modern machines; namely PC, PlayStation 4, Switch, Vita and Xbox One. Even in those contemporary cases, however, the game is committedly old school. There's no saving or automatic checkpoints in place. At most you can save the settings and the scores – and achievements or trophy rewards have also been added.

Interestingly, however, committing to the retro form did birth a modernisation on today's platforms. Studio cofounders Mike Tucker and Matt Cope wanted to stick with the original 4:3 aspect ratio presentation when porting *Xeno Crisis* to new systems; consoles that typically default to display at 16:9. Committing to 4:3 left Bitmap Bureau with an unused strip of that 16:9 screen estate, leaving it with a quandary; how could it use that area meaningfully, without upsetting the blissful balance inherent in its game? In the end the developer decided to add a simple retro-flavoured HUD to let players easily track the likes of health stocks, ammunition supplies, grenade tallies and the in-game currency, dog-tags.

"IT'S A BIT OF A CLICHE, BUT I JUST WANTED TO MAKE GAMES THAT APPEAL TO ME"

MIKE TUCKER

» [Mega Drive] Run-and-guns such as *Smash TV*, *Out Zone* and *Shock Troopers* have clear influence.

» [Mega Drive] A *Xeno Crisis* sequel is planned, with Bitmap Bureau pursuing something more welcoming and broad.

» [Mega Drive] Special weapons only last a limited time, but bring all kinds of new ways to overcome the enemy waves.

PUSHING SCORE

BITMAP BUREAU'S COFOUNDER SOUNDS OUT XENO CRISIS

"On top of the look of the game, the music was really important to me," says Mike, on beginning to unearth *Xeno Crisis*' captivating, pumping soundtrack. "At some point I discovered this guy who claimed that he was writing music for the Mega Drive sound chip. He was called Savage Regime, and we found his stuff, and it was incredible. It was so good I just thought there was no way it was really Mega Drive compatible; really running on Mega Drive hardware.

"It sounded like it could be a Mega Drive piece of music, but something really special; even impossible," Mike continues. "So I got in touch with him and he confirmed to me that it was all genuine and would work on natural hardware, and I was just amazed. So I asked him if he could write us some music for this new game we're starting, and he was very excited to get going. That's the final piece of the puzzle to begin work on *Xeno Crisis* too. At that point we had the idea, and we had people for the music, the art, the design, and the code. That was enough to get the Kickstarter going."

You can hear the results for yourself by purchasing the CD from shop.bitmapbureau.com

we take on, but without taking that too far. We're not rewriting the book, you know, or trying to create anything massively unique for the sake of it, because we don't feel like we really need to. We know the kind of great games we love, and I think the audience we have do want to play games that take them back to that era."

And so it is that Bitmap Bureau set out to work on unashamedly authentic games informed by an era when gameplay was blistering and difficulty looming. They don't ooze with an excess of modernisations – and in the case of their most esteemed work, top-down run-and-gun *Xeno Crisis*, most of the target platforms are (officially, at least), obsolete.

Before *Xeno Crisis*, however, Bitmap Bureau's first game took a somewhat conventional route to the game-playing masses. *88 Heroes* presented a punchy, chaotic 16-bit-inspired action platform approach that debuted on Steam, PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Switch. Yet it was but a prelude to what would emerge as one of the most respected modern retro games of the current era.

Xeno Crisis was first released physically to Mega Drive in 2019 following a triumphantly successful crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter. The game bears a passing resemblance to The Bitmap Brother's beloved run-and-gun *The Chaos Engine*, but on spending a little time with it, plays much more like Saurus' remarkable top-down Neo Geo shooter *Shock Troopers*, and Toaplan's wonderful genre take *Out Zone* (and to a lesser extent, it's sequel *FixEight*). Indeed, those arcade titles were explicit influences, say the Bitmap Bureau team. If you know *Shock Troopers*, *Xeno Crisis*' automatic close-quarters melee attack might make you vulnerable to immediate bouts of SNK nostalgia. There's also a healthy dose of *Smash TV* in the mix.

In the wake of its Mega Drive release proving that there was significant interest – and a workable commercial model – in releasing to a technically obsolete platform, Mike and Matt worked to bring *Xeno Crisis* in physical form to the N64, Neo Geo AES and MVS, Neo Geo CD, Dreamcast and GameCube. There's also been ports to PlayStation 4, Vita, Xbox One, Switch, Mac, PC, Linux, and even the Evercade systems. Official ROMs are also available for the Sega and Nintendo platforms, for those not still maintaining a classic system.

Clearly, Matt's experience taking games to different platforms – and apparent devotion to the pleasure of taking on the most challenging ports – has served both Bitmap Bureau and *Xeno Crisis* very well indeed.

What's especially interesting about *Xeno Crisis*' platform-hopping journey is that it began life on an older system, with the full intent of generating a living for its team. It wasn't a homebrew project or ambitious side hustle, but a fully operational studio's key focus following *88 Heroes*. It might have been easier, many would assert, to establish success and attention by releasing *Xeno Crisis* to modern platforms, before tackling a special Mega Drive edition for the collectors and most devoted

» [Mega Drive] An in-game store lets you level-up health, weapon power, ammo stocks and more.

» [Mega Drive] Get used to becoming very familiar with *Xeno Crisis*' game over screen.

» [Mega Drive] The quality of the pixel art on display is equally evident in the cutscenes.

» [Mega Drive] *Xeno Crisis*' famed difficulty spirals to imposing heights as the finale nears.

fans. But Bitmap Bureau isn't a studio stifled by following convention.

"After *88 Heroes*, we knew we wanted to really go for it," Mike explains. "We saw the success that Matt Phillips had with his Kickstarter for *Tanglewood*. He got over £50,000 for that, and *Tanglewood* was just so cool. We felt like we could offer something new to Mega Drive owners, and then saw what was possible on Kickstarter. So we went for it, and we raised over £70,000, and that was a nice amount of money to give us the time to make this game and get it out there. As we had these preorders sorted, Matt started on the Dreamcast version, so that was another early revenue stream for the game."

> "AFTER 88 HEROES, WE KNEW WE WANTED TO REALLY GO FOR IT"
> MIKE TUCKER

Ultimately, Bitmap Bureau proved there is a commercial model in making games for vintage platforms. The team might not have hundreds of staff or a towering headquarters, but they were making money, and getting a lot of positive attention for their new run-and-gun. Because *Xeno Crisis* is a very good game. It's hard as hell, unapologetically brutal, and makes little concessions to the sensibilities of modern players brought up on autosaves and replenishing health bars. Throwing you into a Giger-esque world directly informed by the art and style of the *Alien* franchise, *Xeno Crisis* asks one or two players to work through room after room of invading monstrosities, each unleashed by antagonist Dr Herzog (a nod to Technosoft's superb RTS/shmup hybrid *Herzog Zwei*, perhaps?). A multi-directional shooter in purebred form, it plays tight, responsive and fast, and while the difficulty is sky high, it gently nudges you to improve your game with each run. In other words, it's consistently exciting and profoundly rewarding to play.

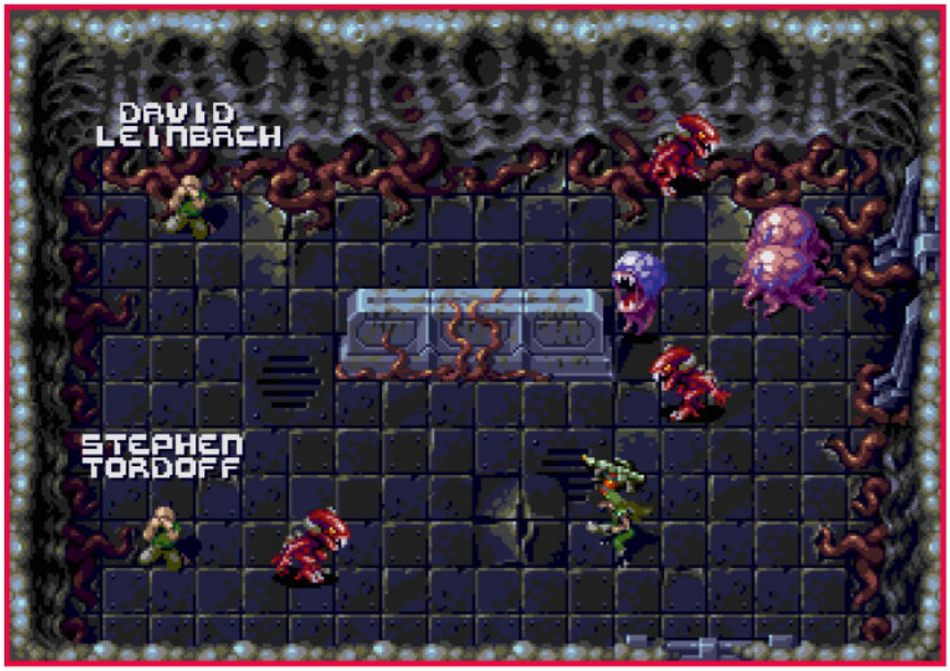
In fact, the reason the team chose to start on Mega Drive was – in part, at least – because they saw that the machine was somewhat underserved by top-down run-and-guns. But there was another factor too; namely, Matt's love of a technical challenge.

"With Matt, I think he relished the challenge of creating a game for a system from back in the Eighties and Nineties," states Mike. "The Motorola 68000 [a stalwart microprocessor across so many gaming platforms] is still an awesome thing, and I think it was quite a lot of fun for him to get to work with such a famous bit of tech."

Those reasons actually inspired Bitmap Bureau's much lesser-known Mega Drive work, and true first title, of which only one physical copy exists worldwide. At the start of Bitmap Bureau's journey, Mike and Matt entered Global Game Jam 2016. The friendly competitive event tasks small teams with creating a game from scratch in 48 hours. Instinctively, Mike and Matt chose to target a platform from 25-or-so years previously, and made the shooter *Fatal Smarties*. They might not have won the jam, but the player and press attention showered on their game convinced them they could do more with a release for Sega's beloved platform.

Fast forward a short time, and Mike and Matt were finding the extra talent they needed to make *Xeno Crisis* a reality. "Early on we hired Henk Nieborg, the amazing Dutch pixel artist who's been around since the Amiga days," Mike

» [Mega Drive] The focus is on clearing single-screen rooms one by one. That's easier said than done.



» [Mega Drive] Rush to the hostages or tackle the enemies? *Xeno Crisis* throws up split-second strategic decisions.

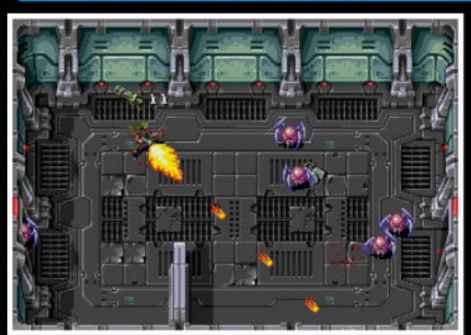
▶ reveals enthusiastically. "He'd worked on *Lionheart* and so many others, and he would really define the look and feel of our game. And he has this eye for design too, so that was invaluable."

Soon after Mike would secure a musician known as Savage Regime, after stumbling upon Mega Drive music by the producer so remarkable it seemed like it had to be running on other hardware. With that piece in place (see Pushing Score) Bitmap Bureau had the art, music, coding and design expertise ready to begin the Kickstarter campaign.

Post that £70,000 campaign, the end result is a game that has been enjoyed on more platforms than most releases dream of. Bitmap Bureau has built a fan community across the globe, and established itself as a key player in the contemporary retro-game dev scene. *Xeno Crisis*' music and art are rightly adored, setting new player expectations about what is possible from a modern game for classic hardware. Mike and his team, meanwhile, would go on to work on *Final Vendetta*, a gorgeously crisp pixel-art scrolling beat-'em-up informed by that genre's

CRISIS MASTER

HOW TO SURVIVE XENO CRISIS' BRUTALLY HARD ROOMS



DIAGONAL COVER WORKS

■ As is the case with *Xeno Crisis*' influencer *Shock Troopers*, a reliable strategy is to try to hold firm in a corner firing diagonally across the screen's centre. It's not infallible, but a good number of enemies will be drawn into your ordnance using this method.

DOG-TAGS MATTER

■ When you start out as a *Xeno Crisis* player, dog-tags might seem rather trivial in their value. But collect them up and you can spend them in a store following bosses. The dog-tags can then be invested in health improvements, weapon power, extra continues and more besides.

TACKLE SIDE ROOMS

■ There's a bounty of optional side rooms available, and you should explore and clear them whenever possible. Beyond offering up extra action and a chance to save allied hostages (with names taken from some Kickstarter backers), they provide more of those precious dog-tags.

classics. Unexpectedly, it even had a soundtrack that included exclusive tracks from Utah Saints.

That's not to say *Xeno Crisis* is done with, though. Far from it. The team has something exciting brewing, and it starts with taking lessons from their marvellous Mega Drive game. "We see that *Xeno Crisis* is quite brutal in that there's no checkpoints as such. And once you've used all your continues, you're dead. And you have to 1CC the game to get the proper ending," Mike explains. "I think we've learned a few lessons there, really. Our core audience loved it, but we probably made the game too hard, and with the sequel, you know, we're going to be a bit nicer to the player. It will be quite a different game."

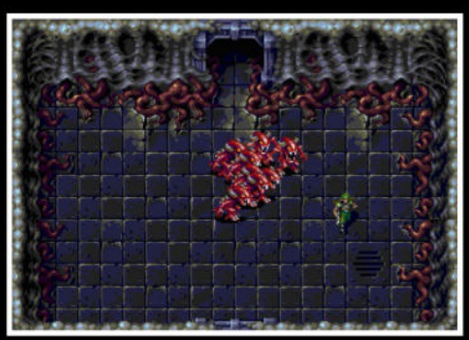
A sequel? Mike has mentioned plans for a sequel before, but there's been very little detail. Until now. "We will make this sequel," Mike asserts. "It makes a lot of sense to do it. We loved making the original, but as a Mega Drive game it needed to fit on a four-megabyte cartridge. For Mega Drive games that's quite chunky, but by modern standards, you know, four megabytes isn't a lot. We had to really squash everything in there, and there were certain ideas, and concepts in terms of the scope, where we had to pare it back for *Xeno Crisis*' release. So we'd really like to make a more expansive game; more of a console game – if you like – than an arcade game. Because as you know, there's a big difference. To me *Resident Evil* was a great console game; something you can put a few hours into and play at your own leisure, meaning there's checkpoints and so on.

"*Xeno Crisis*, by comparison, is very much an arcade game. It's meant to last 40 minutes or so, and you're meant to restart every time you die. So next we want to make something that players can get really stuck into. They can choose their own path through the game, so there'll be multiple routes. There'll be multiple characters this time, each with different abilities. When making the original we had time constraints as well as memory constraints, but for the sequel we're really going to up the level of things significantly. We've got so many new ideas for it. Henk's already got loads of ideas. And we've got some other new tech that we're going to bring into it. I can't talk about that too much, because we don't want anyone to get the jump on us there, but we've got lots of exciting things lined up."

> **"FOR THE SEQUEL WE'RE REALLY GOING TO UP THE LEVEL OF THINGS SIGNIFICANTLY"**
> **MIKE TUCKER**

Mike can't say any more for now, but he's already blessed us with a tantalising level of detail. And with that, he must get back to his work running a studio that has built a handsome reputation connecting the past, present and future of games. ✱

» [Mega Drive] The pixel art really shines with the bosses, who all bring grotesque detailing.

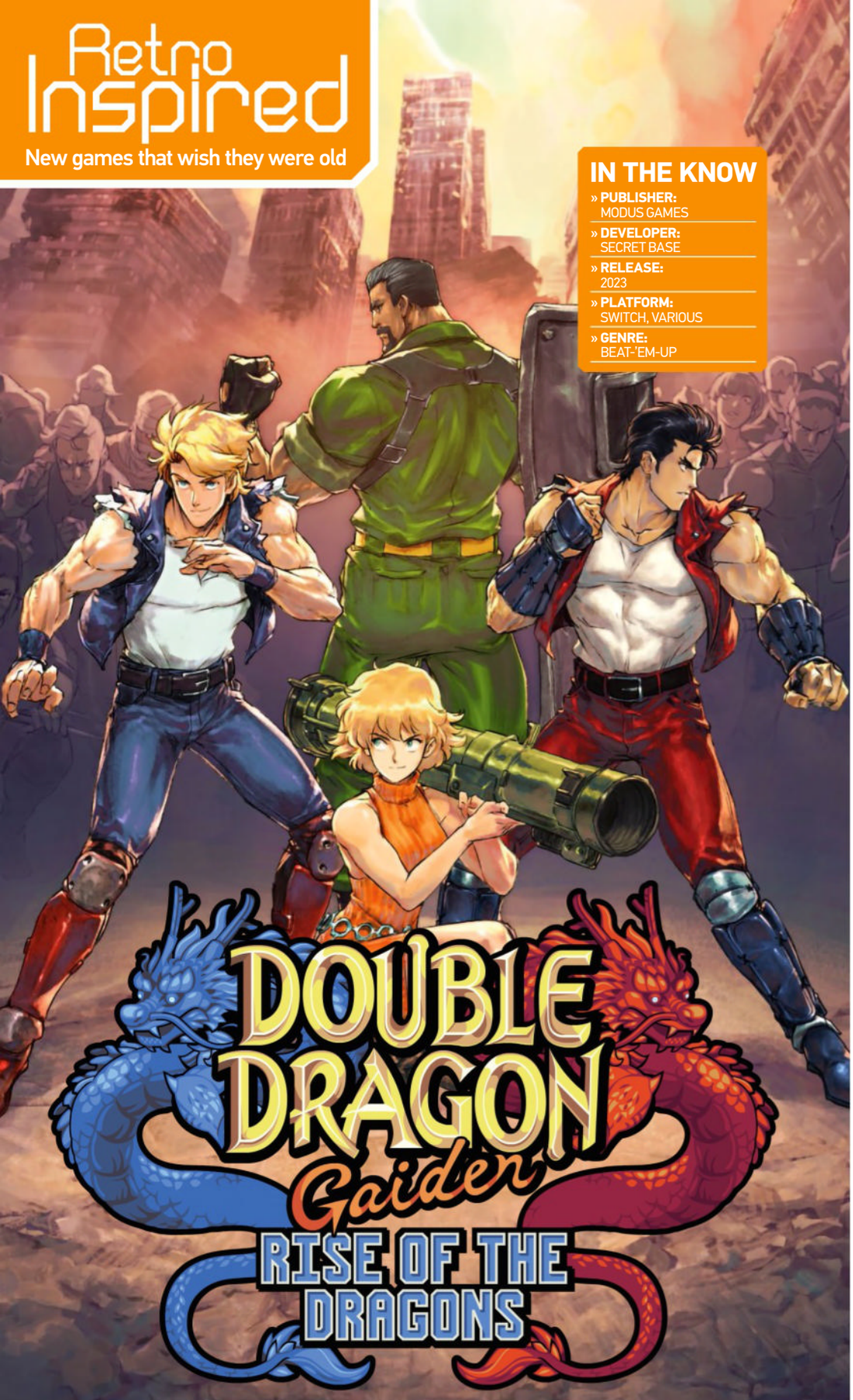


CIRCULAR HERDING

■ In many of the busier rooms you'll often be overwhelmed by foes on all sides. Try to find an opportunity to dive to the edge of the room, and then move around those enemies in a large loop. This can gather them up before you mow them down.

YOU WILL GET BETTER!

■ Playing *Xeno Crisis* can feel demeaning. But it does a brilliant, slightly stealthy job of constantly improving your abilities. It's remarkable how much you'll see yourself improve over a few credits, so stick with it, and know every failed run will be worth the time invested.



IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** MODUS GAMES
- **» DEVELOPER:** SECRET BASE
- **» RELEASE:** 2023
- **» PLATFORM:** SWITCH, VARIOUS
- **» GENRE:** BEAT-'EM-UP

BILLY AND JIMMY LEE ARE BACK, NOT FIGHTING FOR LOVE BUT DETERMINED TO RID NEW YORK OF MULTIPLE CRIMINAL GANGS FOLLOWING A NUCLEAR WAR. WHAT'S IN STORE FOR THIS BLAST FROM THE PAST? WE TALK TO THE DEVELOPERS TO FIND OUT MORE

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES

When it debuted in 1987, *Double Dragon* kicked off a golden age of scrolling beat-'em-ups. From the moment players began to help Billy and Jimmy Lee face up to the Black Warriors to rescue the kidnapped damsel in distress Marian, there was no doubt they were enjoying something rather special: an innovative co-operative game that forced gamers to confront their enemy while instilling a feeling of elation as bad guys were promptly vanquished.

Since then, proving you just can't keep a good beat-'em-up down, there have been numerous sequels and imitators (as well as a live-action movie that's best forgotten). The latest is *Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise Of The Dragons* by developer Secret Base. It introduces new playable characters, adds tag-team action and features roguelike elements. And it brings back Marian as a firearm-wielding fighter, too.

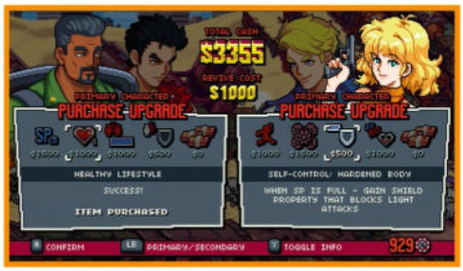
The new game, helmed by Secret Base founder Raymond Teo, is a mainline entry released six years after the disappointing *Double Dragon IV*. Raymond came up with the idea shortly after completing work on another beat-'em-up, *Streets Of Red: Devil's Dare Deluxe*, not knowing that the beat-'em-up genre was about to enjoy a much-deserved renaissance. "When I made the pitch in 2018. I wasn't aware that games such as *Streets Of Rage 4* were in development," he says. But he had lots of new ideas.

"*Double Dragon* started a genre and it was very much about that era," Raymond says. "It was you and your buddy against the world; the connection of a two-player game. When developing this game, we didn't just look at a classic fighter and want to remake it with a modern approach. We wanted to look at the beat-'em-up genre and address what's missing, what made it popular, what elements could help that experience? I was trying to look at the game with a fresh eye."

He identified the two-player aspect of the game as being fundamental to *Double Dragon*'s success. "I was saying, 'How can I make a great *Double Dragon*?' and it sort of came to me, 'What about choosing two characters to control and having a tag-team mechanic?'" It allows players to seamlessly switch between the two fighters by introducing a strategic element. Players can have a wider

» [PC] The new game will look instantly familiar to fans of the arcade original despite the upgraded pixel art.

» [PC] The new game is once again set across grimy city streets.



» [PC] Money is all around you and you have to spend it to make more!

range of devastating combos and defensive and offensive moves at their disposal."

There are 13 unique playable characters in total. The game starts with Billy, Jimmy, Marian and riot-shield-wielding newcomer Uncle Matin, with Tokens earned along the way enabling gamers to unlock nine more fighters, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Picking the cast of characters wasn't easy. "They come with their own properties," Raymond says. "You don't want too many overlaps." But their special moves and unique playstyles aim to keep the battles interesting.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the game is the distinctive art style. The returning characters and villains are faithful in look to the original game but the updated pixel art gives them a fresh feel. It's not a million miles from the approach of Ubisoft's scrolling beat-'em-up *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World: The Game* and it's certainly appealing. "At the end of the day, it's still an arcade-ish game but without the restrictions of the Eighties and Nineties," says Raymond. "I also wanted to showcase the

» Raymond Teo founded Secret Base in 2010, carving a career as an indie developer.

» [PC] Each playthrough of the game presents it own challenges thanks to the introduction of roguelike elements.

» [PC] Want to read more on *Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise Of The Dragons*? Head to page 94 for our review.

different personalities of each character, making sure the way they carry themselves is different and that the expressions are visible. You can see how they react to the situation."

Such situations change throughout the game and the order in which you choose your missions affects the length of the missions, the number of enemies you encounter and how easily you're going to succeed. "The idea wasn't so much to make a roguelike game with *Double Dragon* elements – it was the other way around," Raymond says. "You can perform special moves and, if you do, the enemy will drop cash which you can pick up and spend on upgrades or to revive defeated characters. The upgrades are randomised each time, and you can try the different ones to see which usually works best with your character." For all of that, however, it remains very much an arcade experience.

"Play sessions are meant to be ninety minutes to two hours, maybe a little longer," Raymond says. "You sit down and play through it. You play it again. And there are things that will be familiar such as where the enemies are coming from. But there will be randomised elements that change each session enough to retain interest and keep players on their toes." As for whether the game is directed at long-term *Double Dragon* fans or newcomers? "Both," he concludes. "I think we're in quite a unique position."

DOUBLE THE FUN

Online co-op play is on the way

Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise Of The Dragons allows players to team-up with a friend for some local co-op fun. But if you can't get a pal round for a gaming session, fear not. Developer Secret Base is working on an online co-op mode. It's just taking a bit longer to implement so it's going to arrive a little further down the line. "Making a game work online is a little bit harder," Raymond explains. "It requires a lot of work and testing and we want to make sure that part is in a good state when we roll it out."

In the meantime, he says a single-player experience is sure to be attractive to gamers. "A lesson I have learned from the past is that, despite the effort to make sure a game will be multiplayer, a lot of players actually end up playing single-player, so we want to make sure that the player has a good single-player experience," he explains. "As a kid, I often played beat-'em-ups by myself and, if you can introduce a good mechanic, then you can improve the experience. So we want to make sure it works for one or two players locally then, eventually, be like, OK, once all of that is ready let's look at how we can integrate the multiplayer [online] aspect."

THE MAKING OF ROBOCOP 3

WEAVING TRAILBLAZING 3D VISUALS, CINEMATIC CUTSCENES AND DIVERSE GAMEPLAY GENRES INTO ONE EXPERIENCE, ROBOCOP 3 WAS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF HOW TO DO A FILM LICENCE JUSTICE. RETRO GAMER SPEAKS WITH MARTIN KENWRIGHT ABOUT HIS PIONEERING POLYGONAL CREATION

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

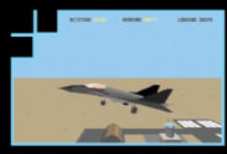
IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** OCEAN
- **DEVELOPER:** DIGITAL IMAGE DESIGN
- **RELEASED:** 1991
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA, ATARI ST, PC
- **GENRE:** ACTION

As intrigued journalists crowded around an Amiga monitor, Martin Kenwright loaded a preview of the *RoboCop 3* game with some trepidation. Martin and his team at Digital Image Design had just spent a year crafting a movie tie-in that rebelled against the trend of somewhat staid, half-hearted computer games that had tended to accompany new Hollywood releases. They'd pushed at boundaries by engineering true 3D graphics, adjustable camera angles, movie-like cutscenes and various gameplay styles into one game. But had they overreached?

Looking around the press event and reading the room, Martin realised he need not have worried. "The music started and they were all looking at the screen saying, 'It's like watching a movie,'" he recalls proudly. *RoboCop 3* was built on the impressive technical groundwork laid earlier in the story of Digital Image Design. Martin recounts to us that he cofounded the company after beginning his career as a "kid making games in a council house bedroom" who was encouraged into coding by a maths teacher. After going into freelance computer-game design straight from college, Martin teamed up with Phillip Allsopp and Andy Torkington to start Digital Image Design in 1989. The Cheshire-based developers had their breakthrough hit that same year with the flight simulator *F29 Retaliator*. Released by publishing powerhouse Ocean Software, it was a commercial and critical success.

Buoyed by the reaction to *F29 Retaliator*, the team started exploring novel new ways to use the 3D engine they had built for that game. "We were looking at what we could do next that would be unique



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

F29 RETALIATOR (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: AMIGA
YEAR: 1989

WRC: WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
YEAR: 2001

MOTORSTORM
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 3
YEAR: 2006

» Martin Kenwright (pictured here in AI-generated RoboCop gear) was a founder of Digital Image Design and is now CEO of the Starship Group of technology companies.

» [Amiga] Emerging unscathed from the wreckage at the end of a mission.

» [Amiga] The developers decided not to include blood in the game to avoid censorship.

and exciting, and I made a demo that was a bit like an AT-AT Walker in *Star Wars*," Martin tells us. "It was kind of like a mech warrior, with the player having a first-person view looking out from the machine in 3D. I had a conversation with Ocean about the demo and they straight away said, 'Wow, that's brilliant.' Then [Ocean manager] Gary Bracey popped up and said, 'Have you ever thought about *RoboCop*? We're still in contact with Orion Pictures and they'd love to see this.'"

Ocean had been partnering with Orion Pictures since the first *RoboCop* home-computer title in 1988. An adaptation of Data East's side-scrolling coin-op game, which had actually been licensed from Ocean, *RoboCop* became a huge best-seller on 8-bit machines. This was followed in 1990 by *RoboCop 2* which kept the same game-design blueprint and achieved similar success. Fortuitously for Martin, Orion Pictures was open to trying something different for the third entry in its series and the demo he'd created went down well. Early storyboards for the film were duly handed over to Digital Image Design so development work could begin.

> **"I THOUGHT THERE WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BREAK THE MOULD AND MAKE SOMETHING THAT FELT LIKE THE REAL ROBOCOP"**
> **MARTIN KENWRIGHT**

As the game director, Martin felt it was paramount that his first licensed title should mirror the cinematic sheen of a high-quality movie production. "Until this point licensed computer games had never really done something that was consistent or aligned with the movies they were supposed to reflect," Martin reasons. "They'd taken characters from the films but just adjusted them to sideways-scrollers. I thought there was an opportunity to break the mould and make something that felt like the real *RoboCop*; something that felt like watching the movie, so the moment the credits and the music came on there was a proper look and feel consistent with *RoboCop*." Martin also wanted to push at genre boundaries by including several ways for players to approach the experience. "It was the idea of being able to do all these things no one had done before – being able to ▶

SAME NAME, DIFFERENT GAME

EXPLORING THE OTHER ROBOCOP 3 TITLES

■ It feels safe to say Digital Image Design's Amiga creation is the most celebrated game adaptation of *RoboCop 3*. It was also the first to be released, arriving in 1991 – two years ahead of the critically panned film. But there were also two entirely separate licensed *RoboCop 3* games that followed. Confusingly, all of these releases share the same name.

Super Nintendo owners could get their hands on a side-scrolling arcade shooter developed by Eden Entertainment Software and published by Ocean in 1992. Versions of that game came to the Mega Drive, Game Gear and Master System in 1993. Gameplay closely followed the blueprint of the first two *RoboCop* games Ocean had published, but it was criticised for its difficulty.

Separately in 1992, Probe Software released a platforming shooter for the ZX Spectrum, the Commodore 64 and the NES. The first level of the home-computer versions featured first-person, lightgun-style crosshairs shooting. The remainder of the game involved side-scrolling platforming, including a later segment where our cyborg hero can use a jetpack to fly. The NES release simplified the design and skipped the first-person action. Reviews were mixed, but at least *Crash* magazine liked the Spectrum game, describing it as "packed to bursting point with excellent backdrops and lots of animation".

» [Amiga] A jetpack featured prominently in the film and does here too.

» [Amiga] The third-person view can be handy for peeking round corners before you open fire.

» [Amiga] In narrow corridors you need quick reactions to avoid hitting hostages.

» [Amiga] Levels are punctuated by newsroom scenes telling the story so far.

» [Amiga] *RoboCop 3*'s 3D sections drew huge praise from the Amiga magazines of the time.

▶ incorporate driving, flying, shooting, all in 3D and all in the same game."

The diverse level types in *RoboCop 3* can be played through in two overarching game modes. Movie Adventure has the feel of an interactive film, leading you through five levels in order, interspersed with cutscenes and animations outlining the unfolding events. Arcade Action mode allows you to play a different series of stages in any order you desire, with the cutscene narratives adjusted to explain the scenarios as training exercises or one-off missions. All of this created a level of storytelling sophistication that wasn't normally seen in action games at the time. "I suppose it felt natural to us," Martin muses when we ask what this stemmed from. "We wanted players to be really immersed in these types of games." The game's soundtrack also added significantly to its edgy atmosphere. Øistein J Eide and Martin Wall, from the audio collective Maniacs Of Noise, composed the brooding soundscapes that accompany the dark sci-fi world.

Behind the curtain of the futuristic animation and artwork in *RoboCop 3*, there were some good old-fashioned techniques at play. "A lot of the artwork came from pausing a VHS video and hand-copying images of key characters," reveals Martin. "Scenes like RoboCop speaking to people at a police headquarters or being at OCP [Omni Consumer Products: a sinister corporation in the *RoboCop* films] were all hand-drawn. We also got people to sit in my Ford Escort RS Turbo and drawing them side-on to look like RoboCop driving."

Martin is modest about how well some of these graphics hold up by today's standards, but he acknowledges that the team achieved something special. "We were trying to be brave," he reflects. "We realised we could overlay wonderful 3D with great set-scenes and artwork. At the

TO PROTECT AND SERVE

HOW AN ANTI-PIRACY DEVICE MADE HEADLINES

SECURITY ACCESS GRANTED..._

■ A major talking point around the release of the *RoboCop 3* game was an anti-piracy dongle it came packaged with. Plugging into the joystick port of the Amiga, the device was necessary for the game to load, rendering it amply protected for the rampant piracy affecting Amiga game sales. Or so Ocean thought. "Piracy was off the charts at the time," Martin tells us. "We were happy to explore the dongle but we did think it was a bit of a pain in the neck for players. We thought, 'Ocean are keen, so let's implement it.' But then it created its own headlines."

The interest of cracking groups was duly peaked. "Talk about waving a red rag to a bull!" Martin laughs. "I think everyone wanted to get the game so they could beat the record for how quickly it could be hacked." Achieving this took the collective Fairlight around five hours.

The device did reduce copying of the game, but Martin's unsure if that helped. "In a way that was detrimental, because it didn't reach and scale everywhere as a pirated copy like other games did. It didn't get the virality because it wasn't hacked – there's a weird dichotomy there!"

time, no one had done a 3D corridor shooter game quite like that before. Being able to put together all of these separate gameplay experiences in one really nice movie wrapper felt really exciting."

The close-knit team developed *RoboCop 3* over the course of a year, with the short timeframe meaning late-night shifts were sometimes necessary to keep up momentum. Martin keenly credits the rest of the team, including Russ Payne who he says was instrumental in developing the 3D engine. Ian Boardman, Rod Kenney, Rob Ball and brothers Sean and Paul Hollywood worked graphical wonders. On the programming side, Jamie Cansdale and Dave Dixon led the charge, while Digital Image Design cofounder Phil Allsopp was also crucial. As for his own game director role, Martin describes it as a case of "everything but the kitchen sink" including enhancing the performance of the game. "We worked hard all through that year," he recollects. "It was a really good team. Especially with the technology we had, we didn't have editors and we had to do a lot of things on graph paper to make the 3D super fast. We had to create whole new techniques of rendering, so we could double or treble the speed of our 3D over normal Amiga games."

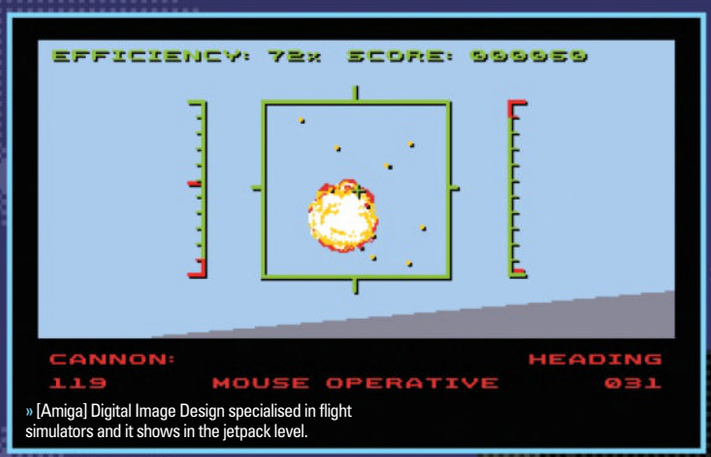
"A LOT OF THE ARTWORK CAME FROM PAUSING A VHS VIDEO AND HAND-COPYING IMAGES OF KEY CHARACTERS"
MARTIN KENWRIGHT

As much as things were looking positive on the development side, there were unforeseen dramas ahead with the *RoboCop 3* film release. "We didn't know at the time that the film studio was ultimately going to go down, that the game would launch without a movie, and that the movie would only arrive years later and be a real disappointment," Martin recounts. The *RoboCop 3* film went into production in 1990, straight after the successful release of *RoboCop 2*. But commercial problems delayed its progress, with Orion Pictures declaring bankruptcy and being acquired by another company before the film finally reached cinemas in 1993 – almost two years after the Amiga game had come out. "There were a few headwinds that we had, and the main one ▶

» [Amiga] A church mission gives you the choice of pursuing rebels within or corrupt security outside.

» [Amiga] Landmarks like the OCP Tower are scattered around the driving map

» [Amiga] Hovering your crosshairs on enemies or hostages creates a cool body scan effect.



» [Amiga] Digital Image Design specialised in flight simulators and it shows in the jetpack level.

» [Amiga] It wouldn't be a *RoboCop* game without ED-209 making an appearance.

was the movie studio going bust," Martin confirms. "But people really loved what we'd made and we thought, you know what, we need to launch this anyway and double down. It was a bit hand-to-mouth financially because the production had earned us so little money. Everyone was feeling the consequences of a major film studio failing. But it was nice that everyone felt confident enough that we could launch the game without the actual movie."

» [Amiga] Hold fire! Shooting hostages can lead to mission failure.

Due in part to the disconnect with the movie release, the *RoboCop 3* game was more of a critical success than a commercial one. An appraisal from *Amiga Format* sums up the feeling from reviewers at the time, "It's a rarity and a joy to write about a film licence which actually works as a game. Licences can be fun, they can be original and most of all they can be playable." Similar praise was seen in PC and Atari ST reviews, with there being little difference between the conversions of the game. Fewer copies were sold than Digital Image Design's debut game *F29 Retaliator*, but the staff were still pleased with how players and critics reacted, given the lack of an accompanying film. "I was really surprised how well it was received," Martin admits. "I don't think it was just the quality of the gameplay, but also that we'd attempted to be bold. It had beautiful artwork, a good 3D engine, and it was trying to move the needle. People might look back now and see some of it as a bit primitive, but you have to remember this wasn't really so many years after the likes of *Pac-Man* and we were running a game in full 3D."

In the following years, Digital Image Design continued to create Amiga games including the space combat simulator *Epic* and the flight simulator *TFX*. Its technological credentials also led to its flight simulation software being widely adopted for military use. "We ended up with military procurement around the world, and our simulators being used by NATO and military planners," Martin explains. "It was a bit meteoric what happened with the company." Sadly for all the founders of Digital Image Design, corporate manoeuvrings would end the company as they knew it. "Digital Image Design went on to brilliant things after *RoboCop 3*, but it had such a horrific ending," Martin sighs, with raw emotion evident in his words as he thinks back to a dispute that occurred with Infogrames after its acquisition of Ocean. "It's painful to this day," Martin continues. "Money gets involved; hostile takeover; bad business practice. It was the baby I set up in my bedroom and I never really got over it. It's like a Greek tragedy when you hear the details, but that's a whole other story. That TV series *Silicon Valley* didn't have a patch on what went down. It was shattering."

Despite the huge blow, it wouldn't be long before the alumni of Digital Image Design would find their next big opportunity. "Sony gave me the first PlayStation 2 development kit in the world and the rights to make a game for the *World Rally Championship*," Martin says with the bounce back in his voice. "They

» [Amiga] The robot ninja Otomo has us floored in the final battle of the game.

"EVERYONE WAS FEELING THE CONSEQUENCES OF A MAJOR FILM STUDIO FAILING"
MARTIN KENWRIGHT

said, 'If you can do for driving what you did for flying, we'll be happy.'" This was the start of Evolution Studios, which also boasted Psygnosis founder Ian Hetherington as its chairman. The company would win BAFTAs for both its *WRC* series of racers and its PS3 exclusive launch title *MotorStorm*. "It was a little bit like something out of a *James Bond* movie," Martin laughs as he reflects on moving on from the collapse of his first company. "You had to get the dust off your shoulders, fix your tie, get out of the rubble and do it all again."

After more than 20 years of being a prolific developer, Martin was ready for a new challenge. In 2013 he formed Starship, a technology and media group which includes the company vTime. His current next-generation ambitions chime nicely with the futuristic cityscapes of *RoboCop 3*. "I ended up making the world's first XR [cross-reality] virtual network with vTime," Martin says, referencing his virtual reality product that works across different platforms and devices. "I've gone back to the stuff that really inspired me. While we were making *RoboCop 3*, we would have *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on the telly in the background and I always wondered who could make the Holodeck. Our company has been focussing on machine learning, generative AI, and the idea of you being able to walk into a room and give a voice-driven description of any reality. It really is like the Holodeck and I think it's pretty spectacular. I don't think I ever would have imagined when making *RoboCop 3* that I would be working on something like this in my career."

These bold adventures in new technology feel like a fitting continuation of the ethos Martin brought to *RoboCop 3*, which is still celebrated for its ambitious attempt to create a lifelike movie experience for the Amiga. Here's to more film licences that explore new horizons in the same way.

MISSION BRIEFING

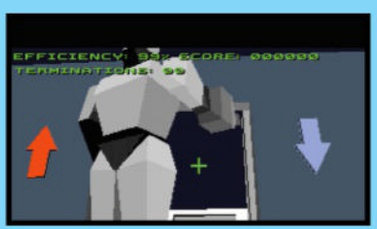
THE GAMEPLAY MODES IN ROBOCOP 3

CAR CHASE

■ Exploring an open map of Detroit in a police cruiser, your mission is to chase down criminals and apprehend stolen vehicles by ramming them off the road. Switch camera angles at any point to get various side-on, top-down or isometric views of the action.

TOWER SIEGE

■ Your goal here is to move through narrow corridors, eliminating enemies and saving hostages. Use lifts to move between floors and switch to third-person view to peek around corners before breaking cover. This level crops up in the Arcade Action mode of the game.



URBAN SHOOT-OUT

■ Another first-person segment where you'll purge the streets of punks. There's a high density of enemies so try not to hit civilians. Look out for landmarks to get your bearings. Remember to shoot grenades to avoid major damage.

JETPACK FLIGHT

■ Take to the skies with your jetpack for a flight simulator-like segment. You'll need to dodge helicopter fire, missiles and small arms first from the ground. Conserve your fuel by limiting how often you use the booster thrust, and stay low to avoid those choppers.

CLOSE COMBAT

■ The final level of Movie Adventure mode pits you in a battle to the death against a robotic ninja, who leaps and somersaults flamboyantly as you pursue. Keep your distance from his deadly sword attack, throw some hefty punches and then reach for your gun.

Hardware Heaven

ESSENTIAL GAME

Super Marathon

The Pippin didn't have many games of note – or many games at all, really. However, it did have arguably the most prominent Mac games of the Nineties. Before it almost single-handedly established the Xbox with *Halo: Combat Evolved*, Bungie made its name with the popular *Marathon* series, in a sign of its future prowess in the first-person shooter genre. *Super Marathon* comprises the first two games in the series. Playing on the Pippin is the most expensive way to experience these games, but they're easily the finest the system has to offer.

Pippin Atmark

» **MANUFACTURER:** Bandai » **YEAR:** 1996
» **COST:** ¥64,800 (launch), £575+ (today, boxed), £375+ (today, unboxed)

In 1993, Bandai had held a keen interest in the videogame market for some time – as well as being a publisher, the company had been a distributor of Nintendo consoles in some European territories. The toy giant wanted a bigger and more direct role in the market, and requested that Apple build a scaled-back version of the Macintosh computer to sell as a console. Apple absorbed the research and development costs, retaining the rights to license the Pippin technology to other manufacturers, while Bandai handled manufacturing.

The Pippin platform was announced in December 1994 and finally launched as the Atmark in Japan in March 1996, by which time Bandai had reportedly spent $93 million on the product. The @World followed in the USA in June. The highly priced system had considerably weaker gaming capabilities than the Saturn, PlayStation and N64 and proved unpopular, and was to be discontinued as a condition of a proposed merger with Sega. When that merger collapsed, a final push to position the system as an internet TV set-top box failed, and the Pippin was quietly retired in 1997. ✱

Pippin Atmark fact

■ The Atmark and @World Pippin systems are not region protected, meaning that you can play Japanese software on American machines and vice versa.

PROCESSOR: 32-BIT POWERPC 603 (66 MHZ)
MEMORY: 6MB UNIFIED SYSTEM AND VIDEO RAM (EXPANDABLE)
GRAPHICS: SOFTWARE GRAPHICS (16/32-BIT COLOUR, MAXIMUM 640X480 RESOLUTION)
AUDIO: SOFTWARE AUDIO (16-BIT, 44KHZ SAMPLES)
OPERATING SYSTEM: CUSTOMISED MACOS 7.5.2
NETWORK: GEOPORT MODEM INTERFACE
MEDIA: CD-ROM (UP TO 650MB)

SUPPLIED BY **EVAN AMOS**

STUDIO PROFILE

KALISTO ENTERTAINMENT

» [PC] *Fury Of The Furries* went on to become one of Kalisto's most successful and well-known games.

Very few French videogames companies created in the Nineties could reach new heights like Kalisto Entertainment, with enough renown to partner with Japanese publishers and create a series of entertaining racing and adventure games

WORDS BY GUY MIQUEL-ALBERT

It all started with Nicolas Gaume's huge appetite for computer science, elaborate fantasy and sci-fi worlds. Born in 1971, he devoted most of his childhood free time from 1979 to analysing his father's Apple II, incidentally becoming an expert at *Pac-Man* at the local arcade. "I started programming at nine," explains Nicolas, "and I could visit IT forums thanks to the later purchase of a modem. I was also part of the first generation consuming a lot of pop culture.

"At the time, the biggest part of the videogame business belonged to distributors, retailers, and publishers to a lesser extent, but developing games was hardly considered as a job." Classically, he participated in demo parties and software development (a sound-design tool for instance), meeting other Apple enthusiasts in his first year of study. Nicolas then created Brainsoft with other fans in order to develop videogames and obtained equipment funding from Apple, "I grew up in Bassin d'Arcachon and it happened that an Apple executive was spending his holidays there," he tells us. "I sort of besieged his house and he had the kindness to listen to the 19-year-old me."

Abandoning his studies to prepare for management schools, Nicolas took a two-year course in computer studies in 1990, where he would meet among other people Frédéric Motte (programmer and musician) and Cyrille Fontaine (programmer and graphic designer). Frédéric Motte's music tastes were related to the heavy metal and progressive rock bands he liked listening to as a teenager. His father, "Lulled him to sleep a bit too close to the tape recorder broadcasting non-stop Pink Floyd," he says. "Nicolas could give me the impulse to make me understand that, eventually I might be interested in following another path than studying programming. I did not drop

» [PC] *Tiny Skweeks* was one of the first games Nicolas worked on when his studio was still called Atreid Concept.

» [Game Boy] The *Pac-In-Time* Game Boy release is the version published on various home computers.

» [PC] Kalisto found a lot of early success with racing games such as *Al Unser Jr Arcade Racing*.

> "I grew up in Bassin d'Arcachon and it happened that an Apple executive was spending his holidays there. I sort of besieged his house and he had the kindness to listen to the 19-year-old me"
> **Nicolas Gaume**

» [SNES] Kalisto caught Namco's eye, which led to *Pac-In-Time*, a reskinned update of *Fury Of The Furries*.

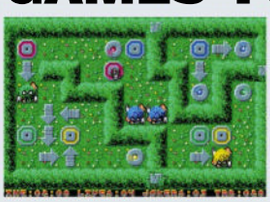
school at first, working at nights and on the weekends, but quickly I told myself that it could be interesting to try to start a career in videogame music composition. It sounded much more fun than ending up working in a software firm."

Out of Brainsoft's ashes Nicolas created his first company, Atreid Concept. Its first work was an adaptation of the Ubisoft puzzle game *Pick 'N Pile* for Macintosh computers, to be developed in a few weeks, and Nicolas had to negotiate the fees directly with a very experienced Yves Guillemot. "Yves Guillemot's cousin was my classmate and since I was talking about videogames from dawn to dusk he told me that I should meet his relative. I got there explaining that we had Apple support and telling Yves he should port his games to the Macintosh. He thought about *Pick 'N Pile*, originally a Michel Ancel game."

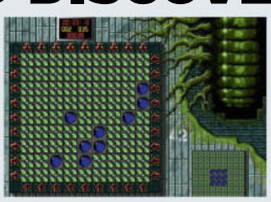
In 1991, Atreid Concept, mainly relying on independent contractors recruited from Nicolas' computer studies course, hired its first full-time employee in order to develop its first original game. Based on little balls of fur, the game would end up being published under several names: Loriciel branded the game *Tiny Skweeks*, when the Mac version arrived it became *The Tinies* and the Super Nintendo version was called *The Brainies*. *SCOut* and *Cogito* were two other games published at the time under the newly created Kalisto Entertainment label.

In 1993, Nicolas spotted the talent of Sébastien Wloch by checking a videogame prototype running in a Parisian magazine office. The prototype depicted a ball that could hang on a wire to move around. It reminded Nicolas of Atreid's own project, *Tiny Skweeks*, mixed with a Spider-Man feel. "The game

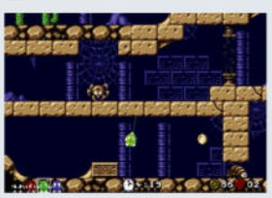
GAMES TO DISCOVER



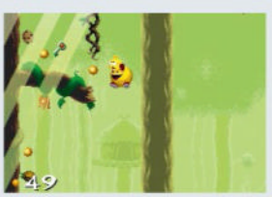
TINY SKWEEKS
1991 (PC)
■ A puzzle game with 101 levels requiring the player to guide balls of fur to specific spots. It's also known as *The Brainies* and *The Tinies*.



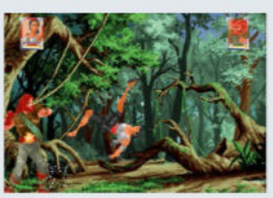
COGITO
1992 (MAC)
■ This is another puzzle game, although this time, the player needs to recreate a requested shape over 120 challenging levels.



FURY OF THE FURRIES
1993 (PC)
■ An extremely cute-looking platformer where furry characters use several abilities, like hooking on a rope to any surface.



PAC-IN-TIME
1994 (SNES)
■ This is a *Pac-Man*-branded version of *Fury Of The Furries*, and sees Pac-Man collecting all Pac Gums in order to progress.



SAVAGE WARRIORS
1995 (PC)
■ A fighting game with 15 distinctive characters, cartoon cutscenes and hectic two-button gameplay.

» [PC] Switching Arkhan's mood from peaceful to aggressive in *Dark Earth* changes any interlocutor's lines of dialogue.

» [PC] *Dark Earth*'s unique pre-engineered sci-fi architecture is generally very impressive.

» [PlayStation] This dangerous werewolf in *Nightmare Creatures* reflects the game's grim, spooky atmosphere.

was very, very ugly, but there was some aerial blast about it," Nicolas says. "I was told it was a passionate reader who sent the game in so the magazine would give it out on a floppy disk." He called him right away to organise a meeting. "Even if the game did not look great, I was amazed by its feel." The ball game, as a platformer, would give a more in-depth experience than the puzzle games produced so far and possibly lead to developing immersive action adventure games in the not so distant future.

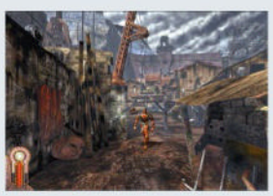
"Sébastien is a very bright person," Nicolas continues. "He was one of our lead programmers from the beginning and worked on *Fury Of The Furries*. We were a group of crazy young people putting everything we loved, everything that inspired us, like *Saturday Night Live*, Ron Gilbert or *Bill & Ted* into our creative process. *Fury Of The Furries* is a game full of references, and became one of our largest successes."

The team had also been targeting the console market, realising that the Super Nintendo processor was the same as the one running the Apple IIGS. It wasn't long before the team got their hands on a machine, playing with one of the first Super Famicoms ever launched, provided by a journalist friend working in Japan. "We could literally dissect the console and became very enthusiastic about it," explains Nicolas. "We developed a version of *Fury Of The Furries* on the console. One of our distributors, Mindscape, knew Namco well and this was the start of our collaboration in producing *Pac-In-Time*. We were later approached by Sony, and they published *Nightmare Creatures* on PlayStation."

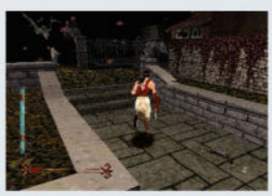
The studio experienced continued growth during the mid-Nineties, focussing mostly on two genres as Nicolas tells us. "Later, we could think about developing action adventure or racing games," he says. "We produced *Al Unser Jr Arcade Racing* for Windows 95 as the very first game for the new OS. It was something big since it was introduced by Bill Gates himself so it needed to be visually stunning. From this point we acquired expertise in racing games development."

GAMES TO DISCOVER

AL UNSER JR ARCADE RACING
1995 (PC)
■ A licensed racing game, which sold over a million units. It includes 15 tracks, Indy cars and multiplayer.

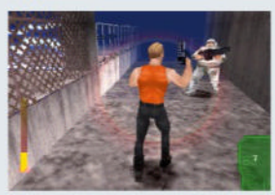


DARK EARTH
1997 (PC)
■ A post-apocalyptic adventure game with pre-calculated set rendering and dialogue depending on the character's mood.



NIGHTMARE CREATURES
1997 (PLAYSTATION)
■ A very dark, fast-paced action game with a light dose of adventure gameplay, set in 1834 London.

ULTIM@TE RACE PRO
1998 (PC)
■ This is another of Kalisto's ambitious arcade racing games. It features solid drifting mechanics and a fantastic soundtrack.



THE FIFTH ELEMENT
1998 (PLAYSTATION)
■ A 3D action game offering shooting and martial arts, which integrates cutscenes from the film between gameplay sequences.

» [PC] *Nightmare Creatures* requires some skill to master the intense, close-combat gameplay.

» [PC] *Ultim@te Race Pro* utilised Power VR and was sold in a 3D card bundle.

Kalisto's expertise in the action adventure field was acquired through its *Dark Earth* project. A writing workshop was implemented on Nicolas' impulse, following his fascination for the works of JRR Tolkien and tabletop role-playing games. "Background and narrative aspects could give videogames, which needed an interaction grammar, much more depth, that you could mostly find in RPGs," he says. "To make a difference, we needed to build an art direction based on a cosmogony, a history, vocabulary, objects, anything that would give a videogame a coherence and a very deep immersion feeling. It was also a matter of meeting the right people. Guillaume Le Pennec, a videogame journalist, joined us to work on *Dark Earth* and we realised that with his writing skills we could develop many things," he continues. "I also met Frédéric Weil, creator of a tabletop role-playing games company named Multisim, producer of *Nephilim*, who supervised this writing workshop. It helped develop richer backgrounds that we could turn into pictures.

> "We were a group of crazy young people putting everything we loved, everything that inspired us, like Saturday Night Live, Ron Gilbert or Bill & Ted into our creative process"
> **Nicolas Gaume**

It also helped in the creation of everything related to Hollywood and book projects revolving around *Dark Earth*."

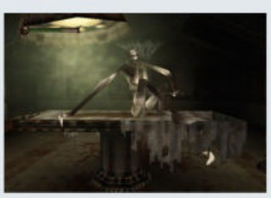
Eric Thommerot joined the company in 1997 as a PlayStation developer to help finish *Nightmare Creatures*. "The game was created in very special circumstances, not being Kalisto's priority, the studio being focussed on *Dark Earth* and *Ultim@te Race Pro*," he recalls. "There weren't any expectations, and the development team could mostly do and decide whatever they wanted. These were ideal conditions to create a good, unexpected product. Activision USA, Sony Europe and Sony Japan chose to publish *Nightmare Creatures* six months before release and from then on the team started feeling a little bit under pressure."

The metal music, sometimes quite extreme, used as an essential component of *Nightmare Creatures*' original soundtrack, caused quite a buzz at Sony. "Sony Japan was clearly not excited about it. I actually wonder if it was not Sony's English branch that was the most reluctant," recalls Frédéric. "Thankfully, Nicolas made it possible for us to use the soundtrack as we originally imagined it."

Kalisto's next racing game was the aforementioned *Ultim@te Race Pro*. "During a salon we met the Videologic teams; they created the Power VR chip in partnership with NEC that was really revolutionary and different from the usual graphic chipsets," recalls Nicolas. "We really wanted to work on 3D videogames and we had a good feeling with the people at Videologic so we started to develop *Ultim@te Race Pro*. This started the collaboration between Sébastien Wloch and Emmanuel Nouaille."

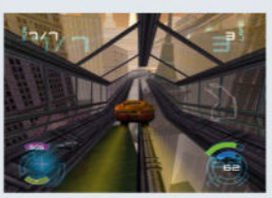
Emmanuel remembers the racing game well. "*Ultim@te Race Pro* was the first project I worked on as a graphic designer. This technology was introduced to us during a presentation in our studio in Bordeaux. We had a briefing on everything the Power VR could allow in terms of 3D game development. At the time we had to show our technical capacity in order to be able to start developing the game which would be sold with the 3D card as a bundle." ▶

4 WHEEL THUNDER
2000 (DREAMCAST)
■ Kalisto's sole Dreamcast racer is based on Midway's popular *Thunder* licence and offers plenty of arcade-style off-road thrills.

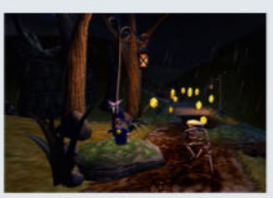


NIGHTMARE CREATURES II
2000 (DREAMCAST)
■ A sequel to *Nightmare Creatures* set in 1934 Paris starring a crippled and psychotic character.

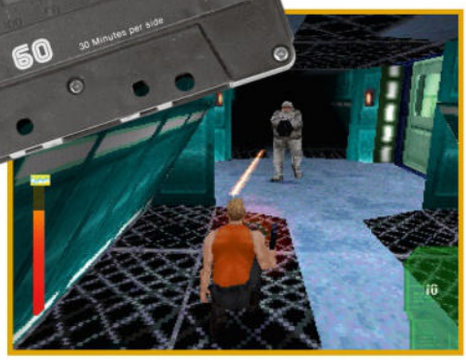
LUCKY LUKE : WESTERN FEVER
2001 (PLAYSTATION)
■ A 3D action game starring the comic-book character, developed under very tight deadlines.



NYR : NEW YORK RACE,
2001 (PLAYSTATION 2)
■ Kalisto's last racing title was a futuristic racer inspired by *The Fifth Element*. It features neat elemental-based power-ups.



CASTLEWEEN
2002 (PLAYSTATION 2)
■ Also known as *Spirits & Spells*, *Castleween* is a Halloween-themed platformer featuring two kids who can use fire and ice abilities.



» [PlayStation] Kalisto's *The Fifth Element* saw you switching between Korben and Leeloo as you tackled the game's 16 missions.

» [PlayStation] *The Fifth Element* offered some very interesting level design but was wasted by flawed gameplay.

» [Dreamcast] Featuring a vengeful escaped test subject, *Nightmare Creatures II* was quite ahead of its time.

Ultim@te Race Pro also made an impression thanks to its soundtrack as Frédéric recalls. "I wanted to create something very dynamic in the guitar register," he says. "Everything started from a bassline that had been running through my mind for a while. Being unfortunately a poor soloist guitar player, I asked Stéphane Alaux to play wild solos."

> "The Dreamcast's power could allow a technical tour de force that Philippe Rivaillon, the lead programmer, utterly wanted to implement"
> **Emmanuel Nouaille**

Kalisto also worked on a videogame adaptation of Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*, which also shared connections with the earlier *Nightmare Creatures*. "*The Fifth Element* was developed using *Nightmare Creatures*' engine," explains Eric. "The team wanted to create much longer levels, and add more graphic diversity, which [meant] reducing the size taken by the textures by two, leading to a more pixelated game. This was very much criticised by the press and the game could not compare favourably to *Metal Gear Solid*, released on the same day in Japan."

Despite the disappointment of *The Fifth Element*, work at Kalisto continued, with one project quickly leading to another. "Videologic made some industrial progress thanks to *Ultim@te Race Pro* and Sega found an interest in using the Power VR chip for the production of their Dreamcast," recalls Nicolas. "Since we already had strong relations with Japan (Namco for *Pac-In-Time* and Sony for *Nightmare Creatures*) and since Japan was our second best-selling market after the US, we could connect very well with the people at Sega and thought about developing a racing game for the Dreamcast called *4 Wheel Thunder*."

"The Dreamcast's power could allow a technical tour de force that Philippe Rivaillon, the lead programmer, utterly wanted to implement," Emmanuel adds. "He wanted to ensure the game's fluidity to be stable at 60fps even in split-screen mode. Nobody thought it would be possible, nothing forced us to do so but it ended up being a true technical asset that was showing Kalisto's know-how."

But some projects never worked out, like the attempt to make *Dark Earth 2*. One of the cancelled projects was made in partnership with the Japanese publisher Squaresoft that sent studio members to Bordeaux, including Tetsuya Nomura as an art director. According to Nicolas, "It was a huge cultural shock! We had the chance to work with the team that produced *Final Fantasy VII* but Square's development culture was focussed on the 'image', the visual aspects, when we were more into coding, more involved into developing games' mechanics than using visuals. The ways of working were so different! Nomura-san, for instance, added fallen angel's wings to a character we spent months to design, but wings imply that the character would not fall the same way, so we had to restart programming from scratch. For the anecdote, as a Square production team visited Kalisto Entertainment, they spent some time in Saint-Emilion, a nearby city, that inspired them to create the whole visual aspect and textures of *Vagrant Story*."

Nightmare Creatures' sequel also had problems. "Eidos, having poached part of the

THE DNA OF KALISTO ENTERTAINMENT

HOW THE STUDIO STOOD OUT

ADVENTURE GAMES

From the beginning, the team's ultimate goal had been to create games with effective storytelling and gorgeous graphics. *Dark Earth* embodied this achievement, offering rich post-apocalyptic environments and adventure game mechanics.

APPLE IIGS

At the heart of Kalisto Entertainment's early years, when the studio was named Atreid Concept, Apple and the Apple IIGS played a major role in the company's growth. Later on, it released a Macintosh port of Michel Ancel's *Pick 'N Pile*.

RACING GAMES

From the development of *Al Unser Jr Arcade Racing* to the release of *NYR: New York Race*, the studio never failed to offer good racing thrills. Specialising in Indy cars, monster trucks, stock cars and futuristic vehicles was one of Kalisto's trademarks.

» [Dreamcast] Very challenging but nonetheless providing a lot of fun, *4 Wheel Thunder* was technically impressive.

» [PS2] Kalisto's *NYR: New York Race* game was its last racing game and was a tie-in with Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*.

Nightmare Creatures' development team, and the latter not being motivated to work on a sequel meant the second episode was created in a less-secure environment, with more pressure and expectations," explains Eric. "The process took a lot of time, and at some point, with a graphic engine supposedly developed outside the team never coming, the project almost had to start from scratch. Being published so late, it did not impress anyone anymore."

All the Kalisto projects needed to be financed early, so the studio went public in 1999. "It was quite unrealistic," recalls Fabrice Carré, who joined Kalisto that same year. "We were learning how to follow the stock exchange quotations on dedicated websites, imagining we would become rich someday. We later knew a tough fall." He elaborates, explaining, "Before the collapse of the new economy, Kalisto experienced a growth crisis, and some appointed managers were not adapted to our job and our culture. We also experienced some difficulties working with the Austin and Paris studios, because we did not have a proper multi-site collaborative work culture. Everything deteriorated with the crisis, some publishers went bankrupt, some did not have capacity to meet their financial commitments, and others were waiting to know who would win the console war between the Xbox, the PS2 and the Dreamcast before signing a contract with us. It was very frustrating for all of us because there were excellent projects in the pipeline."

Nicolas also laments the end of the studio that created so many interesting games. "When you create things there are moments when you suffer a lot, moments that are complicated, especially at the end of the studio's history. These were 12 years of an incredible adventure, though." ✱

For more on Nicolas Gaume's fascinating career, read his book *Citizen Game*.

AMAZING SOUND

■ The original soundtracks of Kalisto Entertainment's games easily please the ear. *Pac-In-Time*, *Ultim@te Race Pro* and the *Nightmare Creatures* scores, composed and co-written by Frédéric 'Elmobo' Motte, originally an Amiga demo maker, all deserve honourable mentions.

THE K PLATFORM

■ The studio felt the urge to make it possible to reuse its technology and overwhelming data (textures, mesh, animation) from one game to the other in order to gain time. Thus the creation of the K Platform, which was also useful for training freshly hired employees.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

WHAT KALISTO'S STAFF DID AFTER THE COMPANY FOLDED

NICOLAS GAUME

Nicolas has founded or cofounded nine startups in total. He discovered a strong appetite for entrepreneurship when he launched a children's book publishing company in China. One of the latest, Space Cargo Unlimited, is dedicated to microgravity research, helping make plants become more resistant to climate change by sending Bordeaux wine with space missions. He also works at Microsoft in the National Transformation Partnership Department.

EMMANUEL NOUAILLE

Emmanuel still works in the videogame industry. His latest project as a creative director was *Century: Age Of Ashes*, published on Steam and consoles in December of 2021 as a free-to-play game, where players could ride dragons to fight in PVP mode in a dark fantasy universe. He currently works as a game director on a yet unannounced project.

FRÉDÉRIC MOTTE

Frédéric was Kalisto's sound designer and music composer, fond of metal and progressive rock. He firstly used the nickname Moby, and had to change it to Elmobo. He discovered the demoscene with a C64 and started making music with his Amiga. He owns a recording studio dedicated to metal bands, Conkrete Studio. He has recently composed the music for the rhythm game *Double Kick Heroes*.

FABRICE CARRÉ

Fabrice is a trained engineer who joined Kalisto in 1999, firstly working in an R&D department, then on a game project and eventually for the game engines support service. He is writing a soon-to-be published book on his fascination with Mars. He is also working on a serious game project to accompany children going through kidney transplants.

ERIC THOMMEROT

Eric is a computer engineer from the Bordeaux region. He has worked for 20 years in the videogame industry for several companies (Coktel Vision, PopCap, among others). He developed half-a-dozen games and produced many more. He now works in the R&D department of an online decoration firm. He is trying to get back to working in the videogames industry.

DEV
MAP
SHIELD
WEP
NORMAL
USE
WATCH

Fade To Black

FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

RETROREVIVAL

» PLAYSTATION » 1995 » DELPHINE

I didn't get a PlayStation until 1997. Melanie wasn't too happy about me buying one as we'd recently taken out our first mortgage and money was rather tight, but she eventually relented on the basis that I found one that was reasonably priced.

After a fair amount of looking, I settled on a deal in Currys – the package contained the PlayStation, *Rayman*, *Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos*, *Porsche Challenge*, *Fade To Black* and one other game that I can't remember for the life of me. Still, it was about £50 more than a base PlayStation and seemed far better than the other bundles that were available.

Fade To Black was the first game I played, because I loved *Flashback* and knew this continued Conrad Hart's adventure. Initially I was blown away with how it looked, but the more I played, the more disillusioned I became with it. I found Conrad hard to control, moving around was disorientating and its heavy puzzle elements felt at odds with the tricky blasting. The cutscenes were decent and the numerous deaths were quite gruesome, but the core gameplay felt too sluggish and I found it really hard to get into.

There's a great line in *The Simpsons* where Marge is told, "That's the trouble with first impressions, you only get to make one." It's a line that's always stayed with me and it was certainly true with the case of Delphine's game. I was largely unimpressed with the other games in my bundle and if it wasn't for the fact that I received *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* that Christmas, I'd have probably written the console off.

Interestingly, I went back to *Fade To Black* about a year ago, via the PS3 and I actually quite enjoyed it. With no weight of expectation, it was easy to enjoy Delphine's game for what it was – a solid little action adventure game that was occasionally held back by its own lofty ambitions. You may only get to make one first impression, but that doesn't mean it's always right.

THE LEGACY OF SYSTEM SHOCK

EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT SYSTEM SHOCK THESE DAYS, BUT WE REMEMBER A TIME WHEN IT WAS AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY. RETRO GAMER RETURNS TO CITADEL TO EXPLORE THE HISTORY OF ONE OF GAMING'S MOST IMPORTANT PC RELEASES... AND ITS RECENTLY RELEASED MODERN UPGRADE

WORDS BY ADAM BARNES

It's funny to think that back when *System Shock* first launched, it wasn't met with such a big audience. That's not to say that those who played it didn't love it, in fact to those people it was immediately captivating and unlike anything they had ever experienced before. It was even well-received by critics, so it wasn't like there weren't people raving about it. Yet while it did manage to sell enough to be considered a worthwhile effort, it was termed by those involved at the time a 'disappointment' in terms of sales. So it's funny to think, because now if you say the name *System Shock* to a gamer, not only will they likely know what you mean, but there's a high chance that you'll elicit a rather excitable response from them. So what happened to turn it around? How did *System Shock* go from limited adoration by a cult fanbase to a broad recognition as one of PC gaming's most important releases?

The start of it all came from Looking Glass Studios, then known as Looking Glass Technologies, the developer that essentially pioneered the player-driven gameplay of the immersive sim genre. The inklings of this new open-ended approach to RPGs was already there in *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, Looking Glass' first release with publisher Origin Systems in 1992. It wasn't until close to the end of the sequel to this game in 1993, however, that discussions started to happen around what was next. It was an imperative from Origin, in fact, that started down the route that would become *System Shock*, with the publisher concerned that it was leaning a little too heavily on dungeon crawling for its line-up of games. From there, lead programmer and designer Doug Church led the creation of this new sci-fi adventure. While the core underlying gameplay would still retain some of the *Ultima Underworld* DNA, the new sci-fi setting naturally changed the potential scope somewhat. In some ways, it was the burgeoning capabilities of 3D and the potential for exploration of a fictional, interactive world that gave birth to *System Shock*, which was an answer in part to the frustrations that team members at Looking Glass had with their fantasy RPG. "It was kind of clear that the range of things that could happen in the 3D game – interacting with the objects and the combat systems – was much more varied and different each time you played," Austin Grossman, game designer and writer on both *Ultima Underworld II* and *System Shock*, once said on a podcast with Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab.

A particular annoyance from *Ultima Underworld* was having to pause the gameplay for conversations with NPCs, which Doug described as a separate game unto themselves. It was this sort of thing that was the guiding light for *System Shock*'s development so that the team would focus on creating a world to explore and a fiction that couldn't be broken by ▶

UPDATING A CLASSIC

COMPLETELY NEW GRAPHICS

■ This isn't just a reskin and a higher resolution, Nightdive Studios has recreated all the models, graphics, textures, animations and everything else to create a game that can stand alongside its modern equivalents. It shouldn't matter much, but it'll help in reducing the barrier for younger players.

REWORKED LEVEL LAYOUTS

■ It might seem offensive to alter a classic game's levels, but there's no denying that certain design principles – especially that of level design – have been vastly refined and improved over the years. Here a lot of the maze-like sections have been removed, and rooms have been opened up.

» Jon Chey, project manager and lead programmer on *System Shock 2*, is currently design director at Blue Manchu.

» Stephen Kick, CEO and game director at Nightdive Studios.

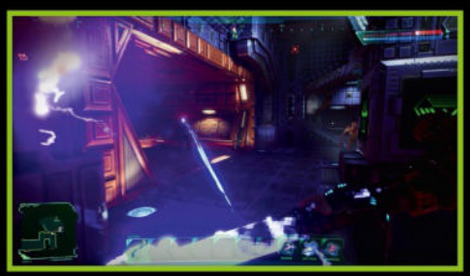
» Evelyn Mansell, co-art director on the *System Shock* remake.

» [PC] In *System Shock*, you are the unnamed Hacker. One brief cutscene later and you're inside Citadel with a brand-new neural implant and zombies all around.

» [PC] Though it was compared to *Doom* at the time, *System Shock* has more in common with classic PC dungeon crawlers.

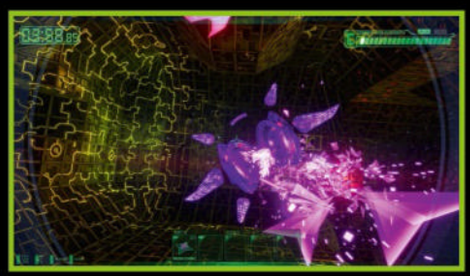
» [PC] Environmental storytelling isn't a new trend, *System Shock* took this concept to a whole new level back in 1994.

A DEEP DIVE INTO NIGHTDIVE'S NEW REMASTER



MODERN COMBAT

■ The enemies in the original were slow and clunky, and they had to be because the player had a slow and clunky interface to fight them with. With a more modern FPS veneer to the remake, it's obviously been a necessity to update the combat mechanics to something more in line with what we're now used to.



CYBERSPACE

■ For as novel as the cyberspace hacking function was in the original, there's no denying it is a little clunky to navigate, especially by modern-day standards. This has been given a huge overhaul, now playing more akin to something like classic *Descent* with the full six dimensions of movement.

THE INTERFACE

■ The original game was blending an adventure game with an FPS, and it was clunky in its attempt to do so. While some of that still remains in the remake (it wouldn't be *System Shock* otherwise), Nightdive has done a good job of refining the menus and the interface without sacrificing the interactivity.

» [PC] The interweaving corridors of Citadel were like mazes to navigate, but the distinct art of each area made navigation intuitive.

» [PC] Horror has come a long way since *System Shock*, but it was still capable of getting your heart going at the time.

» [PC] It says a lot about a game that its clunky camera control is completely forgivable. That multi-part inventory, however…

▶ the player poking and prodding it. "I think the immersive quality of the *Shock* games are what really set them apart from their contemporaries," says Stephen Kick, CEO of Nightdive Studios and the game director on the recent *System Shock* remake. "Just the idea of letting the player explore Citadel or the Von Braun at their own pace is such a departure from other FPS games and entrusting the player to problem solve without shoving the solution in their face really speaks to the respect they had for their audience. You were rewarded for committing to the game and giving it the time it needed to sink its teeth in."

There wasn't really any guidance for Looking Glass in this area, so novel as it all was. At the earliest point of the discussions around *System Shock*, *Doom* hadn't even released yet, and so the idea that they were making an FPS – as the world would go on to know the genre – was not something that the team could comprehend. All they knew was they wanted a cyberpunk setting, a first-person viewpoint, a number of puzzles and challenges for the player to overcome, and RPG systems underpinning everything. Inspiration for the narrative of *System Shock*, meanwhile, came from a collection of poems called *The Spoon River Anthology*, in which a vibrant and tangible place is built in the reader's mind through tales from the inhabitants of Spoon River – all of whom are, in fact, dead. "I originally had *The Spoon River Anthology* in my pitch for [*System Shock*]," Austin told the

SPIRITUAL SUCCESSORS

BIOSHOCK

■ Let's start with the obvious one, since it shares the 'Shock' appendage. For Irrational Games, the idea of *BioShock* was to take the core immersive sim gameplay of *System Shock 2* and make it more accessible for a console-driven market, and it's clear to see how certain mechanics transferred across.

DEUS EX

■ Since this was made by the same developer and only a year after *System Shock 2* released, it might be a stretch to call this a spiritual successor. Regardless, a lot of the lessons learned in creating the *System Shock* series carried over to *Deus Ex*, which allowed Looking Glass Studios to refine (and arguably perfect) the immersive sim genre.

podcast. "So that was the idea that, for me, concretised how *System Shock* could work. Like a series of short speeches from people that, when put together, gave you a history of a place." The advantages of this approach were many: there was no pausing to have to speak with a character, the fiction couldn't be broken due to player input and the visibly limited interactions of NPCs weren't going to create dissonance. The solution the team came up with is rather infamous now: audio logs. "While it might be considered cliche now," says Stephen, "it was an incredibly novel way of storytelling and an innovation created due to the developers' desire to immerse the players without the distraction."

In truth, it was the exploratory narrative that led the blossoming fanbase of the *Shock* games. Releasing in 1994 almost a year after *Doom*, it was too unfair to compare the two first-person viewpoints given id Software's behemoth shooter had a different design intention in mind. In hindsight, it's true that there is some clunkiness to the interface within *System Shock*, a necessary result of the 'adventure' portion of the game, but the industry was too hung up with the immediacy of *Doom* at the time to overlook this. The problem was that the comparison *did* exist since the games were marketed to a similar audience, and without a way to effectively communicate those differences, *System Shock* didn't really get the opportunity for broader attention. "There were no digital storefronts and not much of an online community," explains Jon Chey, one of the lead developers on *System Shock 2*. "So you were reliant on your publisher and distributor to get the game in front of the potential audience. I think if the game had launched on Steam had it been around at the time, it might have been a very different story."

» [PC] Infrequent puzzles do pop up throughout Citadel, but they're diversions to open doors and activate bridges rather than anything else.

At first the idea was not to work on a sequel but rather a new project known as *Junction Point*, which has been described in the past by those involved as an MMO unlike anything seen before. Initially development started on this title, but it was Electronic Arts – which had bought out Origin in 1992, and with it the rights to *System Shock* – that came in and requested a sequel, a request that Jon explains that "we were more than happy to agree with". *Junction Point*'s development was halted and never picked up again, while Looking Glass and new offshoot studio Irrational Games got to work on figuring out the second game. "There were some obvious things that needed to be updated," recalls Jon, "like a modern implementation of mouse-look and revising the controls for leaning and crouching." There was a five-year gap between the ▶

THE GAMES THAT CARRIED SYSTEM SHOCK'S LEGACY FORWARD

PREY

■ 2017's *Prey* wasn't just a reboot of the 2006 game, but it had switched from standard FPS into a full-blown immersive sim. It shouldn't have been too surprising, however, since the team at Arkane Austin has heritage in *Deus Ex* and *Thief*. There's actually an important piece of tech in there called the Looking Glass, in case the *System Shock* homage wasn't clear enough.

SOMA

■ While the underwater setting and crossover themes make *Soma* a better fit as a *BioShock* spiritual successor, there's no denying that a lot of the deeper narrative aspects to Soma are more in line with *System Shock 2*. Then there's its rogue AI named WAU, which might be the inverse of SHODAN but still manages to achieve the same human-extinction levels of power.

SPIRITS OF XANADU

■ One of only three original releases published by Nightdive Studios (including its own *System Shock* remake), *Spirits Of Xanadu* wears its immersive sim influence on its sleeve. It's a testament to the captivating nature of the genre that even with its fairly rudimentary graphics by today's standards, *Spirits Of Xanadu* is still capable of drawing you into its world and mystery.

» [PC] Things got a little creepier and more horrific by the time the second game came out.

▶ two releases, and this was in the Nineties at a time when five years of technology growth was a significant matter, and so it was essential that the sequel looked to modernise everything from input and graphics to game design and sound effects. "Other than that we had two main areas we thought were important," says Jon. "One was revising the character growth to be more numerical and RPG-like and the other was getting rid of the cyberspace concept." With regards to the latter, the cyberspace segments of the original were (rightly) criticised for how tiresome they got, not unlike the *Pipe Mania*-style puzzle minigames of *BioShock*. "We just didn't think it was the best part of the original game and we didn't have any good ideas how to make it better, so we opted to just cut it," Jon says.

But it was a critical decision to shift things more towards RPG-like elements, because in doing so Looking Glass was able to refine the immersive sim genre (though it wasn't called that at the time) into something that could properly empower players to play a game and experience a fiction in a manner that they like. "There's a fine balance between the shooter and the RPG mechanics," says Jon of how the team went about blending the lines of the sequel's gameplay. "We didn't want the game to be like a point-and-click RPG where the rules decided everything but neither did we want it to be a pure action game, it had to be a combination of the two. You can see that tension in systems like weapon degradation which many considered to be too much [like an] RPG that got in the way of the skill-based shooter game."

It's perhaps this reason alone that has led to *System Shock 2* being regularly placed in the various 'Top Games Of All Time' lists that get bandied around on an annual basis. On a mechanical level, *System Shock 2* was an RPG, but on a gameplay level it offered something more direct than much of the competition. Ultimately it was this player-driven approach to its gameplay that went on to inspire the likes of *Deus Ex*, *Thief: Deadly Shadows* and of course *BioShock*. Even contemporary equivalents like *Dishonored*, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* and *Prey* all owe their existence to *System Shock 2*. "In terms of game design, I think we were early movers in applying RPG systems to an action game," adds Jon. "That seems obvious now, but it wasn't back in the Nineties." It might not have had the marketing power to stand out at the time, but it was these core design decisions that made *System Shock 2* a slow

» [PC] The story of *System Shock 2* was significantly more intricate, and came with a good number of twists and turns along the way.

» [PC] You can see the influences that bled through to *BioShock* throughout *System Shock 2*, such as its random narrative spectres.

THE SUPER SEQUEL

HOW LOOKING GLASS REFINED THE ORIGINAL TO CREATE A TRUE CLASSIC

ROLE-PLAYING HORROR

■ Because of the influence of *Doom*, the second attempt at *System Shock* was more RPG oriented. This meant that the sequel could be distinguished from more action-based FPS games, and also that players could have control over how they played.

MOUSE-LOOK CONTROLS

■ The original *System Shock* is still an outstanding game and for all its dated systems and mechanisms, you can still get a sense that it was ahead of its time. But that means of looking up or down with awkward controls or via the little UI slider... that needed to go.

INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

■ It was a super-cool concept with the original game that its multi-display menu interface could allow the player to customise it to show what they found important. But it was nothing if not a massive headache to try to use as you click around trying to remember how to find the map.

burner; there weren't a flock of *System Shock* clones on the market a year or two after its release, but instead it took time for the significance of its player-centric systems to take hold.

But for all the exceptional qualities of *System Shock 2*, it just didn't perform as well as it could have. This time it wasn't a matter of a *Doom* comparison holding it back, but a general lack of awareness. Sadly, despite its high scores, critical acclaim and Game Of The Year awards, *System Shock 2* landed at tenth in the US charts in its first month and didn't get better from there, selling a little less than 60,000 copies in its first few months on the shelves. As a result, EA lost interest in the franchise and no new game has been released in the franchise ever since.

But the story doesn't end there. "My first exposure to the *Shock* franchise was with the sequel," says Stephen, who recalls his friend lending the game to him after Stephen had been praising *Half-Life*. "He threw the big box down on the table the next day and walked away. I installed the game when I got home and I don't think I put it down until about two in the morning. It was unlike anything I had played before and to say it left a lasting impression on me is an understatement." *System Shock 2* certainly did stick with Stephen, and ultimately led him to his work today. Working in the industry as character artists, both he and his wife ended up leaving and in 2012 found themselves on a road trip across the Americas for nine months. Armed with a netbook and plenty of time in the evenings, Stephen found himself ▶

» [PC] Combat is surprisingly tricky in the sequel, which was an intentional way of forcing players to find their play styles and upgrade alongside it.

» [PC] Space monkeys aboard a space station firing explosive fireballs. Sure. Why not?

» [PC] There was a good deal of variety to the enemies that you could encounter about the Von Braun station, but the worst were any that slithered or crawled.

SHODAN

■ We won't belittle SHODAN in the first game; the rogue AI was incredibly well handled and produced, but she was always just the big bad guy, which is where the sequel turned things around. Not only was she more complex than 'just the antagonist', so too was her relationship with the player.

NO CYBERSPACE

■ It wasn't that having to fly around in six-axis movement around a crude wireframe level wasn't just finicky and tricky to manage, but the cyberspace hacking feature of the original game just wasn't fun and took too long. Thankfully it was cut in the sequel.

» [PC] Much like later immersive sims, bypassing the security system was important if you wanted to minimise combat.

SYSTEM SHOCK 3

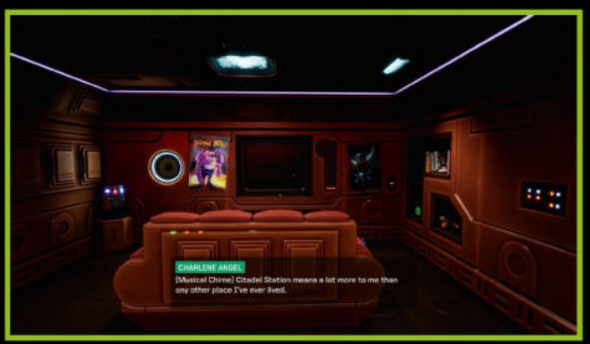
WHERE IN THE UNIVERSE IS SHODAN'S THIRD APPEARANCE?

■ It has been almost eight years since it was revealed that *System Shock 3* would, or rather could, be making it to this world. By December 2015, the world had finally realised how much it loved the series, so the teaser trailer that revealed an HD and properly animated SHODAN was met with great excitement. Better still, it was announced to be in development at OtherSide Entertainment, a new studio created by many of *System Shock*'s alumni including Looking Glass founder Paul Neurath and Warren Spector. Even the original voice of SHODAN was returning.

A gameplay trailer later revealed a very promising *System Shock*-type experience, leaning into the horror elements with modern visuals. For the story, the plan was to focus on a TriOptimum Blacksite and would look into the backstory of Edward Diego.

Sadly, however, there's no idea what state *System Shock 3* is in. Nightdive Studios still owns the IP and had licensed it to OtherSide Entertainment to develop it. But In 2020 after numerous rumours, it was finally confirmed that OtherSide is no longer working on the game, and that Tencent – the Chinese videogames conglomerate and owner of Riot Games and Funcom – will be continuing the development of *System Shock 3*. And since then, nothing has been heard…

» [PC] One of the nice touches of the remake is how everything has a tangible part in the world. There's no going into menus to use keypads or unlock puzzles.



» [PC] The Hacker gets a lot more fidelity and attention in the remake, including a little stint in his studio apartment. Spot the little Easter egg reference?

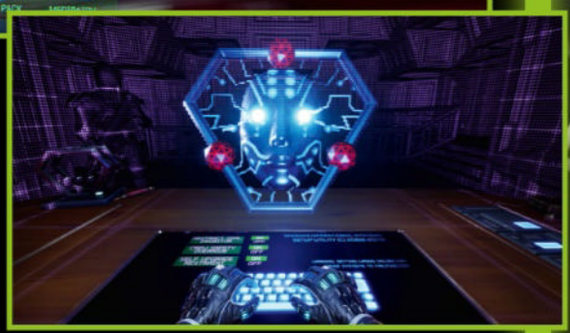
» [PC] The fidelity of the recreated enemies is very impressive. They very much have their own identity, but are very much *System Shock*.

playing old-school PC games to while away the time, where he discovered how hard it was to legally play *System Shock 2* on modern computers. After digging into the matter and tracking down the IP owner, Stephen asked about what could be done. The answer was simple: the original *System Shock* game running on up-to-date computers with modern mouse-look controls. Thus, Nightdive Studios was born, allowing Stephen and his wife Alix to look into updating the classic game.

System Shock: Enhanced Edition released in 2013, and while it wasn't a true remake or reimagining, it was enough to remind the world of the lost classic. The only question was, what's next? "The decision [to work on a *System Shock* remake] was made after we had released the *Enhanced Edition* of the original," says Stephen. "It's going to sound funny, but after something as simple as mouse-look was added it completely changed the entire game. It went from this obtuse artefact from gaming's yesteryear to something we felt obligated to share with everyone." With the success of the *Enhanced Edition*, Nightdive Studios continued to work on re-releasing classic PC games until in 2016 when it had enough funds to purchase the IP, at which point it launched a Kickstarter for a true remake of *System Shock* that ended on $1.35 million dollars.

Truth be told, the development of the reboot did have its share of upsets, partly down to the continual influence of feature creep and over-development. "I think everyone on the team had a slightly different idea of what a modern *System Shock* would look like," says Stephen, and as a result they went with a more "unorthodox approach to design" that allowed everyone to have a say in how all aspects of development should go. "It was very democratic in spirit but it wasn't without causing conflict," says Stephen. "Compromises had to be made, but ultimately I think we made the right choice. We also had the benefit of working with original developers Robb Waters, Paul Neurath, Warren Spectre and Terri Brosius who each provided feedback whenever possible."

The years have been good to *System Shock* and its sequel, but it's clear there's demand and an active fanbase for the series that could have made things tricky for the reboot. "We knew that we needed to keep that claustrophobic, confusing and labyrinthine feeling to the various levels in the game," says Evelyn Mansell, co-art director on the *System Shock* remake, "as well as the somewhat brutal lack of direction." The team felt that changing that "would be very polarising" and there was a risk that younger players might be put off, explains Evelyn, but that ultimately it "wouldn't feel like *System Shock*" if it was done any other way. The reboot itself released very recently in May on PC and console, and brought a number of quality-of-life changes and graphical improvements. Not everything was touched, for example, despite the voice lines being rerecorded, the story itself was kept completely intact. It might've taken seven years and a handful of attempts to get the project to the finish line, but it seems it was worth it: critically it has been well-received, with a lot of the praise relating to the deft hand Nightdive has had in giving a retro classic a glow-up that both a nostalgic audience can enjoy as well as any newcomer. Not an easy task, to say the least. If a similar remake took place for *System Shock 2*, Stephen admits that the team learnt the hard way that it's important to "tread a very fine line between the original and something completely new" when working on a remake of a beloved classic. Stephen is tight-lipped about whether or not we could hope to see a *System Shock 3* in the future, but with interest in the series at an all-time high, there's hope yet that SHODAN might return to cause some trouble and keep the *System Shock* name alive. ✱



» [PC] Nightdive did a great job of modernising a retro classic, without compromising on the nostalgia.

Mouse fact

■ Japanese Dreamcast mouse controllers are different to their international counterparts, with a smaller design that uses transparent plastic rather than a grey that matches the console's case.

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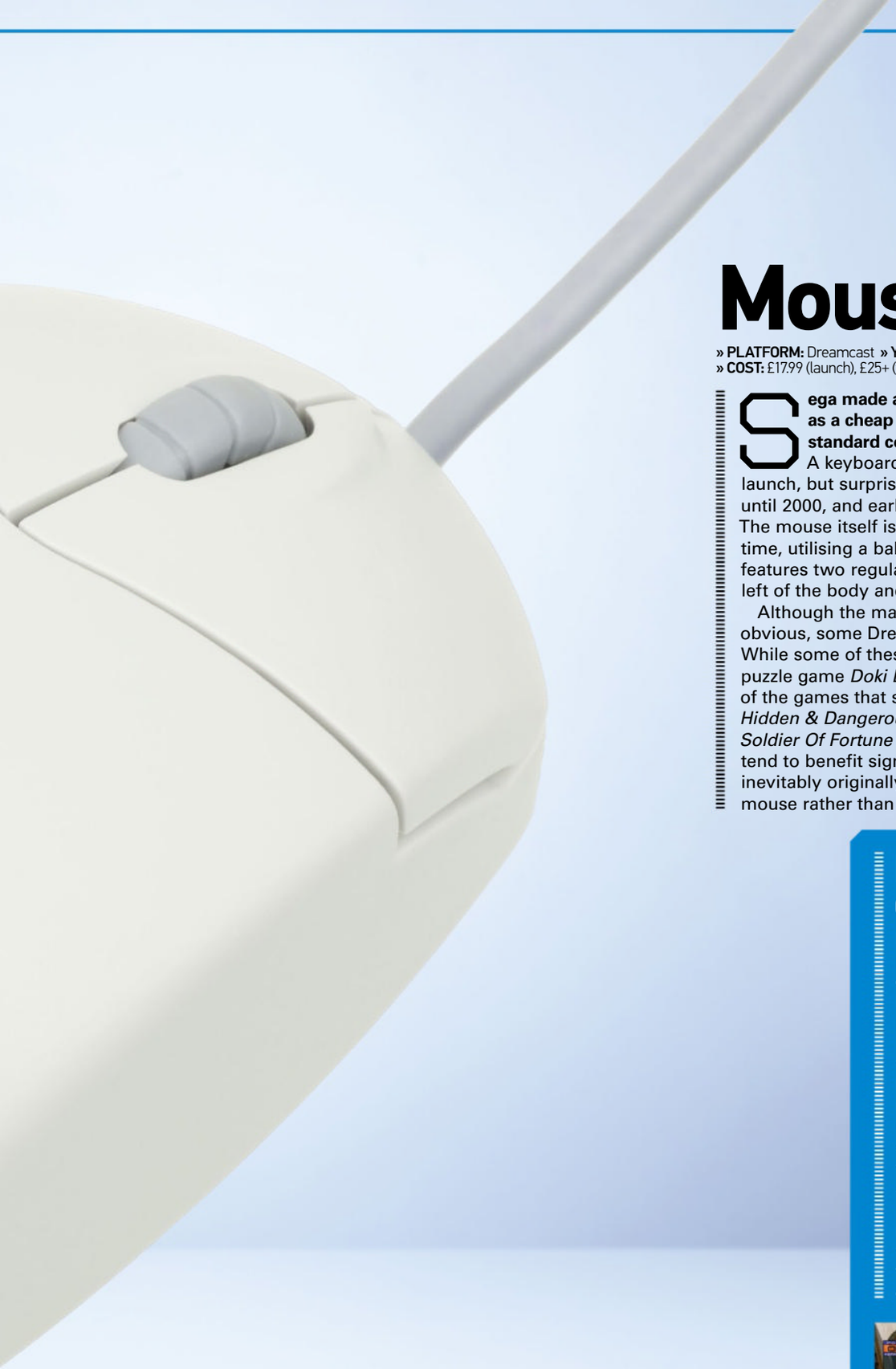


Mouse

» PLATFORM: Dreamcast **» YEAR:** 2000
» COST: £17.99 (launch), £25+ (today, boxed), £20+ (today, unboxed)

Sega made a lot of effort to position the Dreamcast as a cheap way to access the internet, but the standard controller wasn't exactly ideal for the task. A keyboard was made available at the console's launch, but surprisingly the official mouse didn't follow until 2000, and early browsers don't actually support it. The mouse itself is fairly unremarkable and typical for the time, utilising a ball rather than optical tracking, and it features two regular buttons, a third button located on the left of the body and a scroll wheel.

Although the main intended use for the mouse is obvious, some Dreamcast games also support the device. While some of these are quite surprising, like G.Rev's puzzle game *Doki Doki Idol Star Seeker Remix*, the majority of the games that support the mouse are PC ports such as *Hidden & Dangerous*, *Quake III: Arena*, *Railroad Tycoon II*, *Soldier Of Fortune* and *Unreal Tournament*. These games tend to benefit significantly from the mouse, as they were inevitably originally designed for use with a keyboard and mouse rather than a standard controller.

ESSENTIAL GAME
OUTTRIGGER

In most cases, if you're going to play Dreamcast games that offer compatibility with the mouse and keyboard, it's probably just better to play the original PC versions. That's not possible with *Outtrigger*, which was instead ported from the arcade. In its original coin-op form, AM2's innovative first/third-person shooter utilised a joystick for movement and a trackball for camera control, which translates well to a mouse and keyboard scheme. The Japanese release of *Outtrigger* actually came in a special package bundled with the peripheral, while the PAL version doesn't even advertise its compatibility with the device.

THE EVOLUTION OF MIDNIGHT CLUB 湾岸

THE SUCCESSOR TO A PROMISING N64 PROJECT AND THE PC HIT MIDTOWN MADNESS, MIDNIGHT CLUB: STREET RACING PAVED THE WAY FOR A LINE OF POPULAR SEQUELS. DESIGNERS DARREN CHISUM AND JEFF PIDSADNY REVIEW THE EVOLUTION OF ROCKSTAR'S RACING GAMES

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» [PS2] As well as cars, *Midnight Club: Street Racing* puts you at the wheel of customised pick-up trucks.

If there's an underlying theme to Rockstar's *Midnight Club* series it's one of grasping opportunities, and this trend started all the way back with the original title. Its one-of-a-kind driving engine had been created by developer Angel Studios for a cancelled N64 racer called *Buggy Boogie*, and it later repurposed this engine for a PC release called *Midtown Madness*. The firm then used that as a calling card to secure Rockstar as the publisher of its latest project – *Midnight Club: Street Racing*.

Midnight Club's lead designer Darren Chisum had previously been a coder, but he switched disciplines after collaborating with Nintendo designer Shigeki Yamashiro on *Buggy Boogie*. Darren looked to *Midtown Madness* for inspiration for his debut design, and then greatly enhanced its core concepts. "We really liked the frantic feel of racing through a city packed with traffic," Darren enthuses. "I designed the races in such a way that there were multiple potential paths to follow. We had searchlights for checkpoints, and instead of having those in a linear pattern I placed them in the middle of the city blocks. I also really pushed the building designs so that you could drive through some of them, up onto the roofs and then jump back down into the street."

In an inspired move, Angel Studios looked outside the games industry for the design of its vehicles, which by necessity couldn't look too much like real-life models. "We hired somebody who worked as a designer in the automotive industry," Darren notes. "We then gave him props, like we wanted one car to be a cross between a Mustang and a Camaro. Then he would create these amazing hybrid designs. They were unique enough that we didn't have to have to buy the rights to real-world cars, which would have cost a lot, and at the time you couldn't damage or destroy licensed cars either."

> *"WE REALLY WANTED TO PUSH THE FEELING THAT THIS WAS ILLEGAL STREET RACING, AND THAT IT WAS REALLY DANGEROUS"*
> **DARREN CHISUM**

Having found a way to allow players to wreck *Midnight Club*'s vehicles, Angel opted to treat the game's bystanders the same way, in stark contrast to its previous racer. "In *Midtown Madness* the pedestrians would make a magic, last-second jump out of your way, so it was impossible to hit them," Darren points out. "But in *Midnight Club* we let players run into them and send them flying like rag dolls! We *really* wanted to push the feeling that this was *illegal* street racing, and that it was really dangerous."

Of course, where illegal street racing goes the police follow, so *Midnight Club*'s streets were peppered with cops, who at times behaved like those in an Eighties comedy. "We had to tune the police cars to be *crazy* fast to catch up to the player," Darren acknowledges. "They were really the most powerful cars in the whole game. In each city we had a special bonus race where we replaced all the cars with police cars! We had a bunch of them laid

» *Midnight Club: Street Racing* designer Darren Chisum is currently tech director at Bend Studio.

» College professor Jeff Pidsadny worked on *Midnight Club 3* and was lead designer on *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: COOL CITIES

THE URBAN LOCALES OF THE MIDNIGHT CLUB SERIES

NEW YORK

Although far from an exact replica of The Big Apple, *Midnight Club: Street Racing*'s New York lets you tear past famous landmarks such as Times Square and Central Park. It also gives you a taste of New York culture with its range of colourful opponents, who taunt you as you race them.

PARIS

The twisting, turning cobbled alleys of Paris make a nice change of pace after completing *Midnight Club II*'s Los Angeles challenges. You're taught how to drive on two wheels in the French capital, and you have to learn how to deal with environmental challenges such as rain and fog.

LOS ANGELES

The depiction of *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*' host city is simply stunning. It's set up for gameplay, of course, but it's also a living, breathing place, complete with locals to interact with. Additionally, it's the franchise's largest, most accurate representation of a city by far.

» [PC] *Midnight Club: Street Racing*'s engine had previously been used in the PC release *Midtown Madness*.

» [PS2] The damage inflicted on *Midnight Club: Street Racing*'s cars reflects how dangerous street racing is.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
SMOOTH MOVES

NOTABLE TRICKS FROM THE MIDNIGHT CLUB TITLES

NITRO

The nitro mechanics in *Midnight Club II* strike a nice balance. How many shots you have depends on your vehicle, and that's decided by how advanced a model you've unlocked. This comes down to how far you've gotten in the game, which is fair considering nitro can make or break races.

ROAR

Best described as a sonic wave, Roar first appeared in *Midnight Club 3* as one of three class-specific power-ups. Essentially, it blows away any vehicles in your immediate vicinity. Appropriately enough, it's restricted to models with noisy engines, like muscle cars and choppers.

EMP

Introduced in *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*, EMPs disable the electronics of nearby vehicles. As well as getting you up a position or two when you're at the back of a scattered pack, if deployed when you're trailing the race leader EMPs can be the difference between winning and losing.

out along the route that would start chasing you as you went past. Like the end of *The Blues Brothers*, where the whole state's police force are after them!"

Of course, as well as cops, *Midnight Club* had rivals for players to race. Trash talking and taunting complimented their driving skills, and added flavour to the game's challenges. "They were maybe a little too stereotypical in retrospect, but what we were trying to do was incorporate the *culture* of street racing as well as the cars," Darren qualifies. "So with the different characters we attempted to show some of the different types of people in the street racing world. They also gave the player an impetus to continue through the challenges, because you weren't just racing generic cars, you were racing this guy and his gang."

Released as a PS2 launch title, *Midnight Club* sold in its millions. A sequel was inevitable, however Darren moved onto other projects, which created a golden opportunity for Angel intern Mauro Fiore. Having impressed the designer of *Midtown Madness 2*, Mauro was offered lead design on *Midnight Club II*. The Carnegie Mellon Entertainment Technology student then got permission from the university to accept the role in lieu of doing course work.

In keeping with the culture at Angel, Mauro was given the freedom to design the follow-up as he saw fit. Naturally, he used the original game as a template, but then he expanded on its main premise by introducing mechanics that rewarded skillful play. He called one of these mechanics Burnout, which were pulled off by flooring the gas pedal with the handbrake on before the start of a race. As well as burning rubber, hence its name, the manoeuvre would give a speed boost, providing the handbrake was released at the split-second the lights turned green.

Mauro gave the name Slipstream Turbo to another of his concepts for *Midnight Club II*, and although these were similar in their effect to the nitro boosts found in the original game, the way you earned them was entirely different. Where nitro boosts came fitted to certain vehicles, Slipstream Turbos were accessible by any driver, no matter their ride. They became available by trailing directly behind a rival until a meter filled up, with the understanding that it would start emptying if the opponent wasn't stuck to like glue. However, the reward of a full meter would be a high-velocity boost, exceeding what was possible by using nitro at the cost of not lasting as long.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his inexperience, Mauro opted not to produce design documents for these mechanics, or for *Midnight Club II* in general. Instead he would come up with the spark of an idea, before working with a coder to fan that spark into a fully working concept. It's fair to say that this approach was validated when *Midnight Club II* came out. Firstly by reviewers, who praised the sequel's new features, and then by players, who bought it in their droves.

By this point, Rockstar had bought Angel Studios and renamed it Rockstar San Diego.

» [PS2] The cops in *Midnight Club: Street Racing* are fast, and they aim to ram you off the road.

» [PS2] There are police cars in *Midnight Club II*, but they're fairly easy to outrun and then lose altogether.

One of its new hires was Jeff Pidsadny, who had viewed its offer of working on *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition* under Mauro as the opportunity of a lifetime. "I was a *big Midnight Club: Street Racing* fan. I played that and *Midnight Club II* a *lot*," Jeff reflects. "I remember thinking to myself that someday I'd love to work on the series, and when I got the call I was like, 'Are you kidding me? This is *exactly* my thing!'"

One of the new aspects of the third *Midnight Club* title was the addition of circuit modes, based on set routes, unlike the open-world modes that defined the series. "In the open-world races you might be going from point to point, but there were all of these checkpoints along the way, and that took cognitive load," Jeff explains. "So by introducing circuits we took that away. You raced the circuits over multiple laps, and you could get better at them. So they embedded repetition and improvement. I also think that they were just something new."

Another first for *Midnight Club 3* was the ability to customise the performance of the vehicles as well as their aesthetics, which hadn't been possible in the earlier games. "It gave the player agency," Jeff assesses, "it let them impact the way that they raced. So if they wanted to do a top-end speed but not handling then they could do that. It also gave richness and depth to the reward, because it gave purpose to the money they earned. The downside was that we had to do a tremendous amount of tuning to make sure that every upgrade was balanced, and of course we wanted the player to *feel* each upgrade."

Additionally, a set of vehicle class-based power-ups were devised for the third *Midnight Club* title, which could scatter or crush rivals, and slow down time. "Those were just about making things a little bit easier," Jeff explains. "They also reflected the vehicle classes. They were sort of like a badge of pride that you had those abilities. That this was your class of car, and this was the ability that came with it. We were also on the edge of two genres. The

» [PS2] The shortcuts in *Midnight Club II* can be tricky to negotiate, but the payoff in time saved makes them invaluable.

> *"YOU RACED THE CIRCUITS OVER MULTIPLE LAPS, AND YOU COULD GET BETTER AT THEM. SO THEY EMBEDDED REPETITION AND IMPROVEMENT"*
> ***JEFF PIDSADNY***

» [PS2] Circuit events such as autocross are introduced to the *Midnight Club* franchise in *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition*.

» [PS2] There's no handbrake in *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition*'s Frenzy mode, and your vehicle gets regular nitro injections!

» [PS2] A standout feature in *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition* is its implementation of street racing on a motorbike.

» [PS2] The remix version of *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition* lets you race the streets of Tokyo.

game wasn't a kart racer, and it wasn't fully a sim, so those special abilities fitted with that. Of course, we were affected by other games, like we slowed things down to bullet time with the Zone power-up."

These novel abilities were praised when *Midnight Club 3* appeared in shops, although its PS3/Xbox 360 successor focussed more on realism, with Jeff as its lead designer. "We wanted to make the world bigger, and the technology afforded us that," Jeff says of the follow-up, "and instead of having separate cities it was going to be one massive one. We didn't have to do different cities, because Los Angeles has such different areas, and we really wanted to represent them properly."

As part of depicting LA accurately, Jeff wanted to show the sun-soaked city off in daylight as well as after dark, which was a risk for a series named *Midnight Club*. "The 24-hour cycle was something we were really concerned about," Jeff concedes. "So the lighting was very purposeful, in terms of lighting-up things to attract your attention. Ultimately, what we found was that even though it might be slightly

› [Xbox 360] There's no strict mission structure in *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*, you can just cruise for races.

» [Xbox 360] You get to race head-to-head along LA's freeways in *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*.

» [Xbox 360] Daytime driving in *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* is a series first, and it really shows off the city.

» [Xbox 360] The *Complete Edition* of *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* includes the original game, its expansion and other DLC.

» [PSP] *Midnight Club: LA Remix* is perhaps misnamed, as it's an entirely original game.

harder to play in daylight, the visuals just superseded any concerns about the gameplay."

As well as wanting the latest *Midnight Club* title to look stunning, Jeff also wanted to immerse players in its reproduction of LA, and so he favoured a map over menus. "The whole interactive map just *worked* for us," Jeff beams, "the fact that you swooped in and swooped out. I remember the first time that it worked. I was like, 'Oh damn!' It was the whole city just sitting there, and it was still a *map*. We didn't have to leave the world; we didn't have to leave the experience. That really helped to immerse the player in Los Angeles."

A perhaps less realistic aspect of *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* was its interactive weather system, but it delivered aesthetic and gameplay benefits in equal measure. "We could tag a hard race by increasing the chances of rain, and the only thing that was odd was that it doesn't rain very often in LA!" Jeff grins. "But we wanted something special, and it definitely added some challenge. It was also visually stunning, because you got the reflections, which were really beautiful. Of course, it also pushed our engine and showcased the hardware. So that was definitely part of it."

When reviews for *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* came in, its recreation of LA was applauded, as was the ambition shown in the design of *Midnight Club: LA Remix* for the PSP, which shared its similarly named counterpart's release date. "I thought it was a very ambitious and interesting delve into the PSP," Jeff reviews, "but it was a different game altogether from *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*. I think it was just about getting the company's feet wet on the PSP platform."

> *"WE DIDN'T HAVE TO DO DIFFERENT CITIES, BECAUSE LOS ANGELES HAS SUCH DIFFERENT AREAS, AND WE REALLY WANTED TO REPRESENT THEM PROPERLY"*
> **JEFF PIDSADNY**

In the year after its release, *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* received an expansion pack and other DLC, and these were later collected on a disk along with the original game. "We always planned on including South Central, because it's a massive chunk of Los Angeles," Jeff says of the expansion. "We had got to a point where we had to cut some stuff, and it was a real natural idea to cut South Central off and do it later as an expansion. Then putting that together with the original game as a *Complete Edition* allowed players to come in late on in the lifespan of the product and get the whole thing for a low price."

As time would tell, *Midnight Club: Los Angeles Complete Edition* acted as a series swan song. However, the designer of the first *Midnight Club* title, Darren Chisum, has some thoughts on a reboot, and a review of his franchise-starting racer. "I think a reboot would mostly just improve on the scale, like bigger cities, more detail in the traffic and more breakable environments," Darren considers. "I can see it having more complex HUD elements to guide you as well. But I think the original still stands up. It's been a few years since I've booted it up, but I last played it many years after it launched, and it was still a lot of fun." ✱

Jeff Pidsadny's opinions on the *Midnight Club* series are his own. He does not speak on behalf of Rockstar Games.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: FUN FEATURES

AWESOME ASPECTS OF THE MIDNIGHT CLUB GAMES

MOTORCYCLES

A mainstay from *Midnight Club II* onwards, motorbikes add variety and replay value to the series. Racing around the games' cities on them is such a different experience to racing in a car. They have blistering top speeds and tight cornering, but they don't cope well with collisions.

CUSTOMISATION

Although you could customise the look of your vehicle in the first two *Midnight Club* titles, it wasn't until the third game that you could ramp up the performance of your rides. You're able to improve every mechanical aspect of your car, truck or bike – as long as you can afford to.

DAY & NIGHT

Until *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*, the races in the series had been set at dawn, dusk or midnight – at night, in other words. However, the opportunity to depict Los Angeles in all its sunny glory just seemed too good to miss, and so you're allowed to race in its LA 24 hours a day.

チャット中
ボケーとする
テレビをみる
シャワーあびる
はみがき
タバコ

Roommania #203

YOU ARE BEING WATCHED

» RETROREVIVAL

» DREAMCAST » 2000 » SEGA DIGITAL MEDIA

It's strange to think just how popular voyeurism was at the turn of the century. *Big Brother* was the hottest new show on TV, and if you weren't satisfied with watching six episodes of edited highlights per week, you could tune into the 24 hour live feed to watch the contestants doing incredibly mundane things. Over on the other side of the world, Japanese Dreamcast owners were enjoying something similar in game form – but instead of watching gleefully as a group of strangers descended into a bickering mess, they were trying to improve the life of one guy living alone.

The vast majority of your time in *Roommania #203* is spent watching young Neji in his studio flat. Left to his own devices he'll do little of much importance, so you take the role of a benevolent spirit who draws his attention to things he should be doing, which you do by pelting his possessions with ping pong balls that he evidently can't see. You've got to be careful though, as throwing too few won't get the activity on his to-do list, throwing too many will just irritate him, and you only have a short amount of time to work with. If you choose to peek into the flat while he's out, you can explore it freely rather than using fixed camera perspectives.

Things naturally take a turn for the odd because this is a videogame, but there's a certain fascination in just watching Neji doing mundane things like watching TV and smoking. It's quite scary to think about, really – the proliferation of smart devices means that most homes are full of cameras that could enable exactly this kind of peeping, which wasn't a real-world concern when the game was developed. My advice is to keep your home networks secure, and if you won't do that, at least do your viewers the courtesy of living an entertaining life.

» This month we battle through the latest Double Dragon, find out if Capcom's remake of Ghost Trick is worth your time and play a VR update of Taito's hit arcade game Operation Wolf

» [Switch] Unlocking bosses is great as they drastically change how you approach Sectors.

Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons

RETURN OF THE KING

INFORMATION

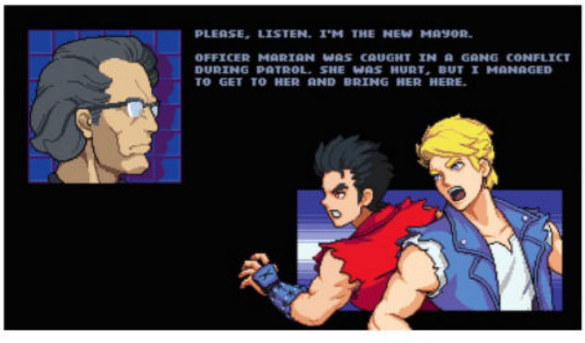
- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** SWITCH
- **ALSO AVAILABLE ON:** PLAYSTATION 5, PLAYSTATION 4, MICROSOFT WINDOWS, XBOX SERIES S/X, XBOX ONE
- **RELEASED:** 27 JULY 2023
- **PRICE:** £24.99
- **PUBLISHER:** MODUS GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** SECRET BASE
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

Scrolling beat-'em-ups have had quite the renaissance in recent years, so it's great to see one of the genre's original trendsetters returning in such spectacular style. As fresh as *Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons* feels for the franchise, it does owe a lot to *Streets Of Red: Devil Dare's Deluxe*, Secret Base's earlier game, which has similar roguelike gameplay mechanics.

Similar to *Streets Of Red*, *Gaiden* lets you approach its four main areas in any order. It also adopts *Streets*' ability to expand stages depending on the order you attempt them. The first level always consists of a single stage and a climatic boss fight. However, each new gang area has additional Sectors, each with their own bosses. The second area has just two Sectors, while the last two have three each. Additionally, the very last level of the four areas has a supercharged version of its boss, who can be a real bugger to defeat.

Gaiden's levelling-up system also expands on *Streets*'. Complete a stage and you'll be able to spend any cash you've collected from defeated enemies on handy upgrades that change with each new run. If there's nothing you fancy (or can afford) you can simply earn extra gold instead. Gold can also be spent to revive downed characters, but the cost accumulates steeply. Then, your only option of continuing is to use any Tokens you've picked up (which unlike a revival, sends you back to the Sector's start). Upon dying your save is deleted and any

» [Switch] *Gaiden*'s story is obvious and slight but the presentation is lovely.


PLEASE, LISTEN. I'M THE NEW MAYOR.
OFFICER MARIAN WAS CAUGHT IN A GANG CONFLICT DURING PATROL. SHE WAS HURT, BUT I MANAGED TO GET TO HER AND BRING HER HERE.

BRIEF HISTORY

» Originally envisioned as part of the *Kunio-kun* series, *Double Dragon* became a big success when it debuted in 1987. Several sequels followed and it found particular success on Nintendo consoles, with games like *Return Of Double Dragon* being particularly good. While later outings have been rather inconsistent (*Double Dragon: Neon* was great, while *Double Dragon IV* was disappointing) *Gaiden* should be considered a solid return for the venerable series.

★PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise Of The Dragons

I've sunk over 20 hours into this now and with each new run I'm discovering new strategies. The soundtrack is absolutely banging as well.

NICK

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

I heard really great things about the DS release of Capcom's game but missed it, so I'm glad I've now got a second chance to try it.

» [Switch] We noticed the odd stutter when things get very busy in local co-op play, but the Switch version otherwise maintains its rock-solid framerate.

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
DOUBLE DRAGON

▼ SOMETHING NEW
DOUBLE DRAGON: NEON

» [Switch] This is a particularly tricky Sector. Look out for enemies hiding in the darkness.

unspent gold is converted to Tokens, which can then be used to unlock music, playing tips, artwork and *Gaiden*'s bosses. While the bosses fall into distinct archetypes, they all play suitably different to each other, adding to *Gaiden*'s longevity.

Before you unlock Gaiden's bosses, you've four characters to get to grips with: Billy and Jimmy Lee, Marian and newcomer Uncle Matin. Unlike with *Streets*, *Gaiden* lets you choose two characters, which you can switch between at will providing your Special Meter is full. Billy has kick-based attacks, while Jimmy relies on his fists. While they're the most basic characters to learn, they remain unique as they are the only selectable characters that can use *Gaiden*'s many weapons. Marian is a little weaker than the brothers, but is fast and comes equipped with a pistol that allows her to make long-distance attacks. Uncle Matin meanwhile is slower on his feet, but has some truly devastating attacks that can decimate groups of enemies.

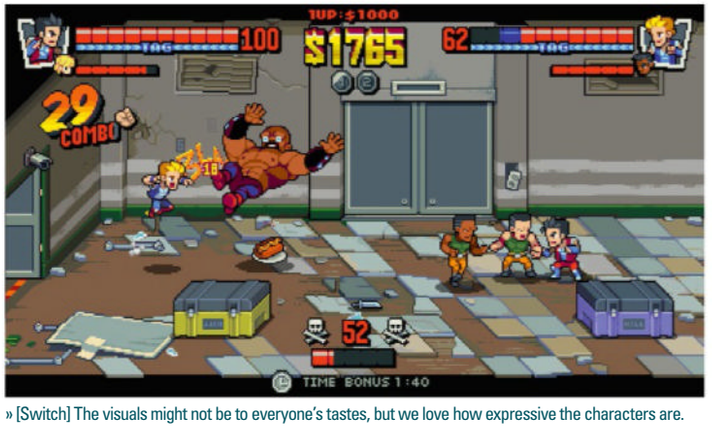
Filling your Special Meter also powers three additional attacks that are activated by pressing X in various combinations, which will reward you with a Special KO! if you defeat any enemies while using them. Multiple Special KO!s also triggers *Gaiden*'s Crowd Control mechanic. Using a Special KO! on three enemies rewards you with a hotdog that restores 25 health points, while a 50-point burger is yours if you down four foes. Finally, pummelling five or more enemies into submission gets you a chicken worth 100 points. It's a great system that rewards strategic play. There's a slight cooldown with the Special Meter so use attacks to quickly fill it up.

» [Switch] Buying the right items is crucial to a successful run. Choose wisely.

Gaiden's fighting engine is exceptionally complex and while it only uses a few buttons and doesn't let you buy new moves, your attacks can be strung together to create some interesting combos. Add in the fact that combos can be continued by tagging in your partner and you're presented with a staggering amount of choice in the way you choose to tackle each new run.

And flexibility is key to *Gaiden*'s success. Before you've selected your characters you can adjust numerous parameters that not only alter the game's difficulty, but also the cost of each Token. Start things off on the lower settings and you'll have an easier time but earn less Tokens, whack everything up to full and progress will be brutal but the rewards are far greater. It just means that no two runs through the game ever feel truly the same.

Gaiden is quite simply the best *Double Dragon* yet. Yes it owes plenty to Secret Base's earlier game and currently lacks online co-op play, as well as the odd performance stutter on Switch, but it's very much its own thing, and is arguably one of the highlights of a genre that's been lying in the gutter for far too long. ✱



» [Switch] The visuals might not be to everyone's tastes, but we love how expressive the characters are.

In a nutshell

Blessed with expressive pixel art and some killer remixes of classic tunes, *Gaiden* is a triumphant return for the Lee brothers. No fighting fan will want to miss this.

» Score **90%**

PICK OF THE MONTH

Ray'z Arcade Chronology

» **System:** Switch (tested), PS4 » **Buy it for:** £43.99+ » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

This digital collection from ININ Games consists of three classic shmups, *RayForce, RayStorm* and *RayCrisis,* as well as HD versions of the latter two games. *RayForce* is arguably the star of the collection, being a fantastic shmup with superb music and a gorgeous 2D art style that still looks tremendous today. *RayStorm* and *RayCrisis* are 3D games and while they don't look quite as nice as *RayForce* they do build on that game's mechanics and are both entertaining shmups.

As you'd expect from M2 this collection is stuffed with excellent extras and options and while it's not on par with those features found in its popular *ShotTriggers* series, what's here is very good. There's a wealth of presentation options, a large number of quick save states, the ability to upload and download replays and you can even change the difficulty of individual levels. Choice is always great in collections like this and M2 doesn't disappoint. Similarly, input lag is excellent and all three games feel great to play.

The HD versions of *RayStorm* and *RayCrisis* are also worthy of your time. They don't really add anything from a gameplay perspective, but one benefit is that they make bullets far easier to see, handy when using the Switch for portable play.

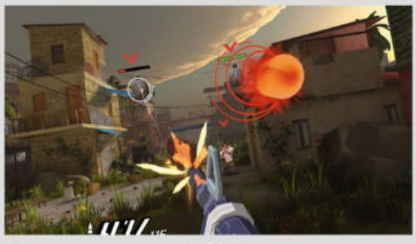
The only downside is that you're missing out on *R-Gear*, a single-level prototype of a cancelled *RayForce* sequel locked behind Strictly Limited Games' sold out physical release (you can still get the premium edition, though). If you don't care about *R-Gear* but still want a physical release your only other option is to import the English-language Japanese release as ININ's own physical *RayStorm X RayCrisis HD Collection* doesn't include *RayForce*.

Cynical marketing aside, this remains a stunning collection of classic shmups. Don't miss it.

» Score **92%**

» [Switch] All three games come with additional soundtracks. We quite like *RayCrisis*' 'arrange' option.

» [Switch] The bosses throughout the series are tough and pack quite the challenge.



Operation Wolf Returns: First Mission VR

» **System:** Oculus Quest 2 (tested) PS5
» **Buy it for:** £18.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

Taito's classic arcade game has been rebooted in VR and it's a lot of fun. While you've still got access to your Uzi, other weapons are also available, including a pistol with unlimited ammo, a machine gun and a rather naff shotgun. There are no comfort options, but the on-rails movement is at a sedate pace meaning VR sickness shouldn't be an issue. There's nothing sedate about the enemy, however, with attacks coming thick and fast, imitating the hi-octane thrills of the original game. It also includes some inventive boss fights and multiple routes through stages, which is nice. It is very short with only an extra Survival mode to extend longevity, but it's a lot of fun while it lasts.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **70%**

Gimmick! Special Edition

» **System:** PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch » **Buy it from:** Online, retail
» **Buy it for:** £12.99

As a rare release that only appeared in Japan and Scandinavia, Sunsoft's NES platformer arguably didn't get the audience it deserved in the early Nineties. It's a technically impressive but challenging game, so the addition of quick saves and a rewind function will be welcomed by many players. For the hardcore, the Speed Run mode and online leaderboards will be welcome too. The way the game lays out its options is very odd, with certain key options only available from the in-game menu rather than the main menu, and graphical features we'd expect like scanlines just aren't present. It's a game that's good for those who relish a challenge.

NICK THORPE

» Score **77%**

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

» **System:** PS4 (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC » **Buy it from:** Online
» **Buy it for:** £24.99

Bad news: you start off *Ghost Trick* already dead. Good news: your new ghostly powers let you possess and manipulate inanimate objects, allowing you to prevent more murders while investigating your own. You can only move between nearby objects though, which sets up plenty of excellently crafted puzzles. Engaging characters ensure that you're highly likely to stick with the plot through all of its twists and turns. The HD remaster works very well due to the original choice of art style and since the original DS release didn't make much use of the dual screens, nothing is lost in transitioning to just one display.

NICK THORPE

» Score **90%**

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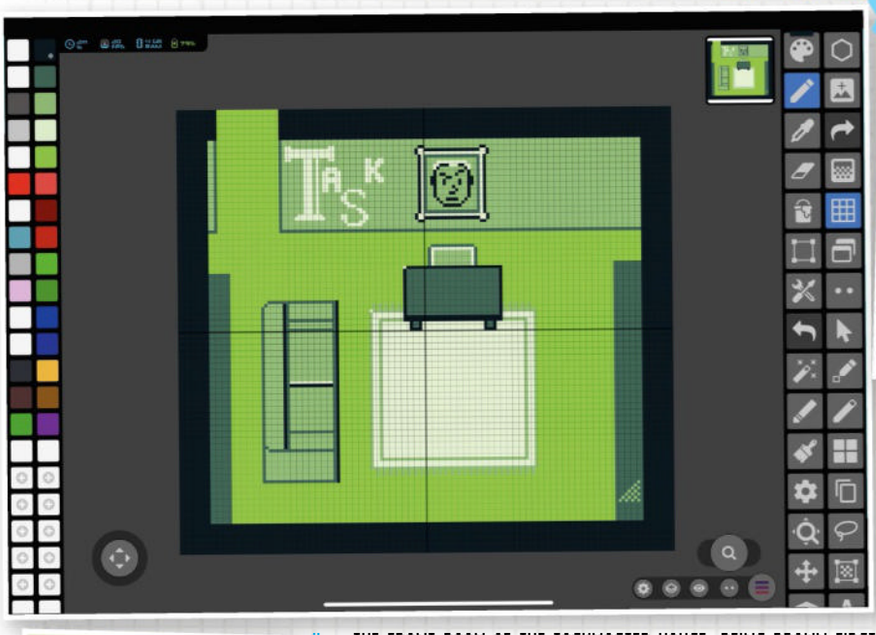
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>



<!--- THE FRONT ROOM OF THE TASKMASTER HOUSE, BEING DRAWN FIRST IN ASEPRITE BEFORE IMPORTING TO GBSTUDIO. --->

<!--- ALEXANDER HAMILTON (LEFT) AND CALUM WILSON (RIGHT).--->

<!--- [GAME BOY] BASED ON A REAL TASK, FUTURE JUNIOR TASKMASTER ROSE MATAFEO MUST HIDE THREE AUBERGINES. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

STUDIO STYLE

<INTRO> WE TALK TO TWO DESIGNERS WHO HAVE USED GBSTUDIO TO TURN THEIR IDEAS INTO NEW GAME BOY GAMES </INTRO>

<INTRO> PRODUCTION ON THE GAME BOY ENDED 20 YEARS AGO, BUT THERE ARE STILL MANY CREATORS MAKING NEW GAMES, WITH THE HELP OF TOOLS INCLUDING GBSTUDIO – THE SUBJECT OF OUR MAIN FEATURE. AND THERE WILL BE A PHYSICAL MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO GBSTUDIO, THANKS TO GBSTUDIO CENTRAL – BIT.LY/GBSTUDIOMAGAZINE WE HAVE MORE SPECTRUM INTERVIEWS TOO, ALONGSIDE OUR USUAL GAME REVIEWS. AND WATCH OUT NEXT TIME FOR AN ISSUE 250 SPECIAL. </INTRO>

<BODY> **"I like journeys, I like stories that take characters somewhere," says Alexander Hamilton of Gnome King Games.** "I like it when encounters lead to fruitful conversation and lasting friendships. That made me want to create *The Train*, as the whole game is about going on one long round-trip and meeting new people." Players take control of Eve as she travels on a steam train and Kickstarter has funded physical copies of the game, which are being shipped to backers. "I was inspired by a Game Boy game I backed called *The Shapeshifter*; it was such a charming little adventure I wanted to make my own."

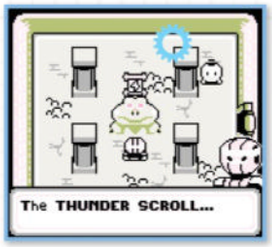
So how did Alexander find GBStudio? "I like how it tells you when a particular scene is too powerful for the Game Boy, and tells you the limits (actor count, triggers, etc) It was really handy," he explains. "While I can make music, I used Ableton Live 10 which doesn't create compatible files so learning OpenMPT [tracker] was super challenging."

GBStudio has now added a tool for creating music, so is he working on anything new? "A sequel to *The Train*, Eve's story is far from finished!" Alexander says. "It's currently not left paper yet as I'm working on my first 3D game at the moment."

GBStudio has been used in several commercial releases, including *Daedus* and the forthcoming *Dragonborne DX*, but it's unlikely you will see *Taskmaster: The Highly Anticipated Videogame* on sale because of licensing issues. "I just love the show," says Calum Wilson of Big Haggis Games. "I really wanted to try and translate the goofiness and fun of the show into a quick pick-up game – and imagine what it would be like if contestants from different series intertwined with each other."

Interestingly, Calum has only recently started using GBStudio. "During the first UK lockdown, I stumbled across a tutorial [video]. From there, I was pretty much

EMIL'S EXAMPLES



DANGO DASH
Game Boy Color

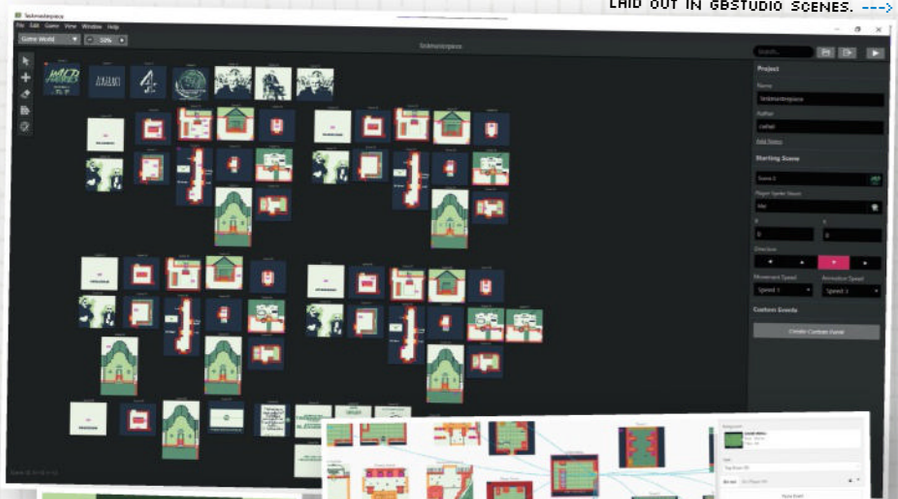
<"Published by Incube8 Games, this is a delivery game with platformer and action RPG elements." It's reviewed in this very issue. />

THE MACHINE
Game Boy Color

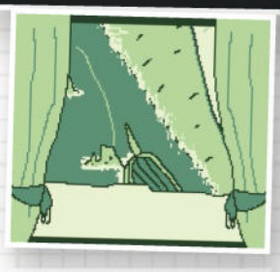
<"Ben Jelter's contemporary and daring approach to story-telling makes it one of the most engaging experiences I have found." />

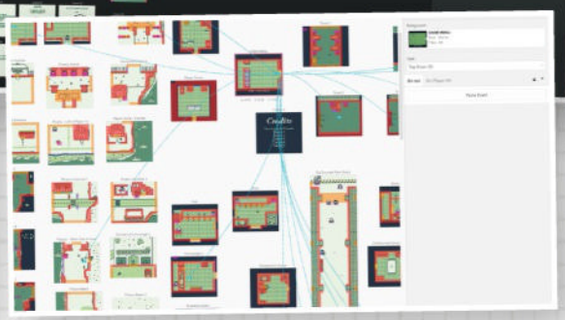
NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

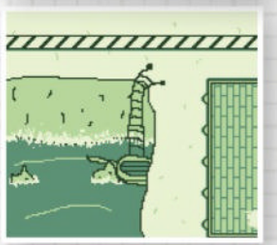


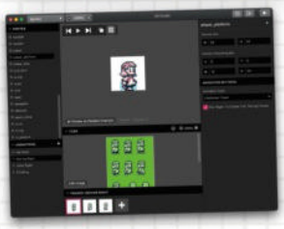
<!--- THE ENTIRE TASKMASTER GAME, AS LAID OUT IN GBSTUDIO SCENES. --->





<!--- STEMS SHOW THE IF... THEN CONDITIONS LINKING SCENES IN ALEXANDER HAMILTON'S THE TRAIN. --->





<!--- THE SPRITE EDITOR IN GBSTUDIO. --->

invested in the idea of making a fun game or two. It seemed so simple; drag, drop and tell it what you want to do. Imagine an overly complicated PowerPoint presentation. There was no need to know any coding to get the game working."

A large community has grown up around the popular tool. "There's some great support out there, such as the r/GBStudio subreddit which really helped with certain aspects, such as triggering actions," Calum says. Has he got anything in progress? "It's another quick game for some good friends, based on their band (shout out to the Junior Boys). Having to talk to NPCs to help get everything ready for a gig, their tour manager goes missing, and in the process of setting up for the gig, they need to look for him too. I also want to do a second *Taskmaster* game with guests from the more recent series. It's all very exciting!" </BODY>

<INTRO> RECOMMENDATIONS FROM EMIL PATERNOSTRO OF GBSTUDIOCENTRAL.COM </INTRO>

GAME BOY CAMERA GALLERY 2022

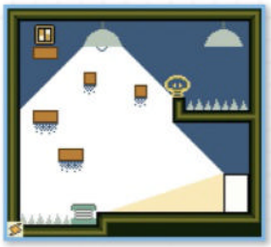
Game Boy

"Explore a virtual gallery filled with artistic photos, taken on the Game Boy Camera by over two dozen photographers." />

BATTY ZABELLA

Game Boy

"A well-made point-and-click horror/comedy game with a dash of crude humour and an abundance of clever and engaging dialogue." />



BULB!

Game Boy Color

"Platformer/puzzle game with a unique 'illuminating' mechanic – also has a wicked physical cart with an LED gimmick to match." />

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

Amstrad CPC: ESP Soft released *Gates To Heaven*, the follow-up to *Gates To Hell* (which is now free to download). Try it by visiting bit.ly/gatestoheaven />

Atari Jaguar: JagStudio v1.11 was recently released – bit.ly/jagstudio – allowing development in BASIC, C or Assembly, and building directly into Rich Whitehouse's excellent BigPEmu emulator – bit.ly/bigpemu />

Atari Lynx: The great puzzle game *Assembloids* is available in Standard and Limited Editions from poly.play. Find it at bit.ly/assembloids-lynx />

Atari XL/XE: Andrea Cucchetto converted the C64 classic *Space Taxi*, with 48K memory minimum but 128K for sampled speech. Take it for a test drive at bit.ly/spacetaxi-xl />

C64: Haplo has converted Andy Johns' gravity-flipping platformer *Ooze: The Escape*, with additional features. Choose your price and get it at bit.ly/ooze-c64 />

Game Boy Color: Get your detective paws on the demo of *Inspector Waffles: Early Days* by heading to bit.ly/waffles-earlydays />

PC Engine: *The Great Fumo Binning* from Vectrex28 is their first title for the console. Check it out at bit.ly/fumo-pcengine />

Various: Haplo continues to convert *Tenebra* to multiple formats, with the original now available on MSX and NES, while the Amiga has received *Tenebra 2*: h4plo.itch.io/tenebra />

VIC-20: The unusual *Supa Vidya Poker* from Huffelduff is part of a multimedia Twin Peaks tie-in in development: bit.ly/svp-vic20 />

ZX Spectrum: PuttyCAD and Richper released the ace match 3 puzzler *Clone Zoo* (top) based on their Android game. Find it at bit.ly/clonezoo />

ZX81: *Lunapark* from Dr Beep crams *Theme Park* into 1K! It's at bit.ly/lunapark-zx81 />

CHAMPION CODER

JOHN DAVIES

<INTRO> A SPECTRUM OWNER SINCE 1982, JOHN IS NOW DESIGNING AND MAKING HIS OWN GAMES </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: INDONESIA WEBSITE: SNAGULTOOF.ITCH.IO FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM PREVIOUS GAMES: ROAD TRIPPIN', ALIEN SLAPHEAD WORKING ON: LIL' NINJA />

<!--- "IT IS FUN TO DEVELOP GAMES BUT IT'S A LOT MORE FUN TO PLAY THEM," SAYS JOHN. --->

WHAT GOT YOU INTO MAKING SPECTRUM GAMES?

<Around 2016, I helped with playtesting and designing Richard Langford's fantastic Spectrum-themed *Project ZX* games. Then I learnt AGD by going through Paul Jenkinson's excellent tutorial videos. I started with *Percy Penguin And The Present Palaver*, a mix of *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*. I used AGDx by Allan Turvey for *Percy Penguin*, and AGDx Mini for my other games. I really should learn Jonathan Cauldwell's MPAGD though. />

WHAT INSPIRED LIL' NINJA?

<I wanted to develop a game that had an overwhelming number of sprites on the screen, with a character that could jump and shoot the bad guys. It was also inspired by a weird animated movie called *Chequered Ninja*. I wanted a way to 'collect' the bad guys after you shot them, so their souls bounce around the screen after they've been hit. You collect souls to grab enough flames to go to the next stage. There are power-ups you can collect, giving the game a strategic element. />

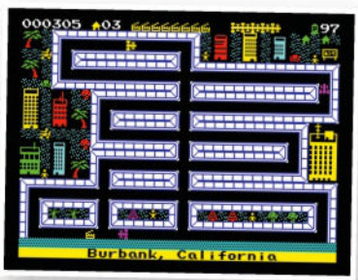
HOW IS IT COMING ALONG?

<It's pretty much done, except for a few bugs. I'm waiting on the loading screen by none other than Clive Townsend, based on a piece of original artwork by Sebastian Borda. I never like to rush things and never give myself any kind of deadline otherwise it might feel too much like work. I like to do it for fun. />

ARE YOU WORKING ON ANYTHING ELSE?

<I'm writing a book – *ZX Spectrum: Old Skool Daze* is about my childhood and of course ZX Spectrum games. I compete in and organise contests in the Facebook group Retro Games Forever. It's a great community. I also like to help other developers – Allan Turvey with playtesting his Spectrum version of *Perils Of Willy*, a few levels for the charity game *Snowed Under*, and levels for Gabriele Amore's *Humans*. I have dozens of ideas for games but I'm not sure what will see the light of day. />

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] JOHN'S ALIEN SLAPHEAD MIXES PLATFORM ACTION WITH TRIVIA QUESTIONS. ARE YOU UP TO THE CHALLENGE? --->



<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] MAZE GAME ROAD TRIPPIN' SEES THE PLAYER DRIVING AROUND MAZES WORLDWIDE COLLECTING RELEVANT OBJECTS. --->

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] LIL' NINJA IS JOHN'S INCOMING GAME AND LOOKS LIKE A LOT OF FUN. --->

DATA BURST

DANGO DASH

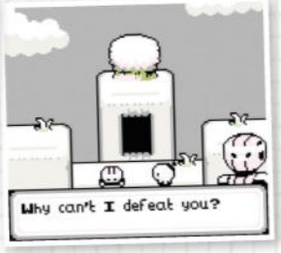
<INFO FORMAT: GAME BOY COLOR CREDITS: INCUBOS GAMES PRICE: $9.99 DIGITAL / $59.99 PHYSICAL (PLUS $2.99 FOR PLASTIC PROTECTOR) WEB: BIT.LY/DANGODASH />

<BODY> **In a village that floats among the clouds, young Dango is sent by his mother to work at his uncle's restaurant.** When his deliveries take him to a temple, he discovers an ancient scroll – and a female ninja from the clan trying to claim the scroll's powers! Winning this fight gives Dango the power of the Thunder Scroll, which gains energy whenever he helps people in his village. Said quests range from Dango running an errand for a villager or finding a lost boy, and he'll often have to navigate underground mazes or swim underwater to do so.

Dango Dash is a delightful mixture of RPG and platform action, with a subtle colour palette and great cartoon characters. Dialogue is genuinely funny and moves the plot along nicely, with the talking scroll being a real highlight. The controls are really slick, which is useful, as you face not only jumping around large mazes but Zelda-style puzzles with moving blocks too. And like last issue's *2031: Moon Escape*, the physical boxed version is extremely well-made. </BODY>

SCORE: 89%

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] DIALOGUE AND HINTS APPEAR AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SCREEN IN A HANDWRITTEN FONT.

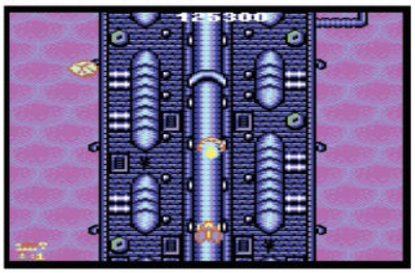


<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] DEFEATING THIS NINJA GIVES DANGO THE THUNDER SCROLL'S POWER.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT



<!--- [C64] THE LATER LEVELS ARE IMPRESSIVE, SUCH AS THIS AIRSHIP SECTION. --->

<!--- [C64] THE LARGE BOSSES EVOLVE AND CHANGE AS YOU DAMAGE THEM. --->

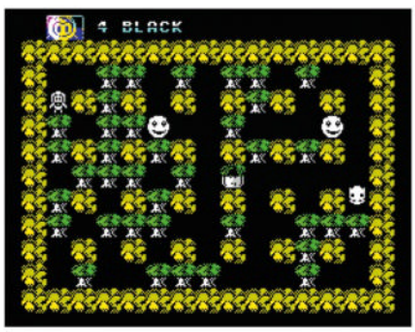
ZETA WING 2

<INFO FORMAT: C64 (DIGITAL, DISK AND CARTRIDGE IMAGES) CREDITS: SARAH JANE AVORY (WITCHSOFT) PRICE: $4.99 PLUS SALES TAX WEB: BIT.LY/ZETAWING2 />

<BODY> **The mutant creatures are back once more to attack Earth, and your space fighter is the only craft that can take them on.** Fortunately, it now has a handy Smart Bomb, which greatly helps to even the score. The power of your ship's main weapon can be upgraded by collecting Stars (which are awarded for shooting down complete waves of enemies). Nine Stars increases your ship's power level by one, but dying reduces it by one. There's also some truly giant bosses awaiting you at the end of each of the game's seven stages. With three well-tuned difficulty levels, clever parallax effects, polished graphics, and Sarah's familiar musical style, this is a worthy sequel – but it does feel remarkably like the original. </BODY>

SCORE: 85%

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] THE CLASSIC POWER-UPS ARE REVEALED BY BLOWING UP WALLS. --->



<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] LATER LEVELS GIVE DIFFERENT BACKGROUND TILES AND ENEMY TYPES. --->

SUPER BOMBERMAN 2 REMIX

<INFO FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM (128K) CREDITS: ZXEVOLUTION PRICE: $3.00 OR MORE WEB: BIT.LY/BOMBERMAN2-SPECTRUM />

<BODY> **Aliens have invaded Planet Bomber, but luckily Black and Pommy are armed with bombs to fight back.** One or two players can take on the campaign mode, which is split into worlds of five levels. Blast all the aliens and walls on each stage to open the exit, picking up icons for extra powers. A password is awarded for completing each world, while two players can enter the arena for frantic bomb-based combat. With an excellent cover of the classic SNES music and plenty of power-ups, this is a great Spectrum adaptation of the Hudson classic. </BODY>

SCORE: 85%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> KEEZEES (KEVIN MCGRORTY) IS WORKING ON A SEQUEL TO HIS 2020 SPECTRUM PLATFORM GAME SAVAGE PRINCESS </INTRO>

<BODY> **"I wanted to have her recovering from the events of *Savage Princess*, so she starts in bed with a hangover," says Kevin about his game's heroine.** "She must deal with whatever has rudely woken her up. Her surly attitude dictated new mechanics, such as using corpses as stepping stones and the irritable comments she occasionally gives the player." Kevin's sequel is being made in MPAGD. "I think all of us AGD users have had our unrealised game dev dreams made a reality thanks to Jonathan Cauldwell," Kevin says. "In the past, I've tinkered with SEUCK and GRAC on the Amiga and PAWS on the ZX Spectrum, but Jonathan's AGD and MPAGD have been instrumental in sparking the recent Spectrum game resurgence. They're so easy to use, being able to make something that looks like a game is an unspeakable joy." Will we have to wait long for the finished game? "Hopefully, it won't be long now! I've been tweaking after my playtesters came back with minor issues, but no major bugs have been reported for a while, so fingers crossed!". </BODY>

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] PERFORMING A CERTAIN MANOEUVRE TO A CORPSE WILL ENRAGE OTHER ENEMIES ON THE SCREEN!. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

» [Game Gear] *Sonic* is normally similar on Sega's 8-bit platforms, but *Sonic 2* is much harder in portable form.

GOTTA GO FAST

We reminisce about the Sonic series

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

» Never thought we'd be saying this after the first trailer, but the films actually aren't too bad.

Since we're covering one of Sonic's biggest and best adventures, it's high time we sat down as a team and talked about Sega's mascot. Nick's affinity for the heroic hedgehog is well known, but do Darran and Tim harbour any affection for him?

NICK

It's fairly obvious that Sonic changed the course of my whole life, but can you remember your first encounter with the little blue rascal?

DARRAN

Obviously in magazines, but the first time I saw the game running was at the Video Game Centre. It's safe to say everyone was talking about Sega's game.

TIM

Seeing it on *Gamesmaster* or *Bad Influence* I think. I didn't join the gotta-go-fast party until I got a Mega Drive and *Sonic 2*.

DARRAN

Sonic 2 was absolutely massive. I remember loads of my friends who weren't really interested in games buying Mega Drives just so they could play it.

NICK

As a kid, I'd just stare at the TVs in the window of Argos because they were playing *Sonic 2*'s attract mode. I spent more of my time with the Master System games since the Mega Drive lived with my dad, and *Sonic 2* was totally different on that. Did either of you spend much time with the 8-bit games?

> "I'd just stare at the TVs in the window of Argos because they were playing Sonic 2"
> NICK THORPE

DARRAN

I sold my Master System in order to fund my Mega Drive so I never played it on release. When I did get a Master System back I eventually played the first as it was built-in to the machine. It was actually a lot of fun and very different.

TIM

Nope, I jumped straight from the Amiga to the Mega Drive, so missed out on those consoles. Though a friend had *Sonic* on the Game Gear, so I had a few goes on that.

DARRAN

I never played those. I assume they're just the Master System editions, right?

NICK

They're mostly the same but have a few interesting differences each time. Did you guys bother with *Sonic 3* or *Sonic CD*?

DARRAN

I played *Sonic 3* around a friend's house, but never owned it myself (I now have it on compilations). I did buy *Sonic CD* at the time as it came with the Mega-CD I purchased and I thought it was really solid. What about you, Tim?

TIM

After utterly rinsing *Sonic 2*, even its class wee multiplayer thing, I was very excited about *Sonic 3*. So I utterly rinsed it too. I never had a Mega-CD, though I did see *Sonic CD* running in Leisure World in Belfast, top floor where all the consoles and remote-control cars were.

» [Dreamcast] Darran never quite got on with *Sonic Adventure*, though the Action stages weren't the problem.

NICK
Sonic CD was a mythical game for me for so long, because I never knew anyone with a Mega-CD. By the time I finally got to play it, I was in my second Sonic phase that kicked off with the Dreamcast. I'm probably the only one of us that likes the 3D games, though.

DARRAN
I must admit I'm not a huge fan of *Sonic Adventure*. It's at its best with the Action levels but I found the Adventure stuff pretty dull. I can never forgive *Sonic Adventure 2* because it introduced the gaming world to Shadow The Hedgehog. Ugh.

TIM
You might despise me after this Nick, but after *Sonic & Knuckles* my interest in the franchise just died.

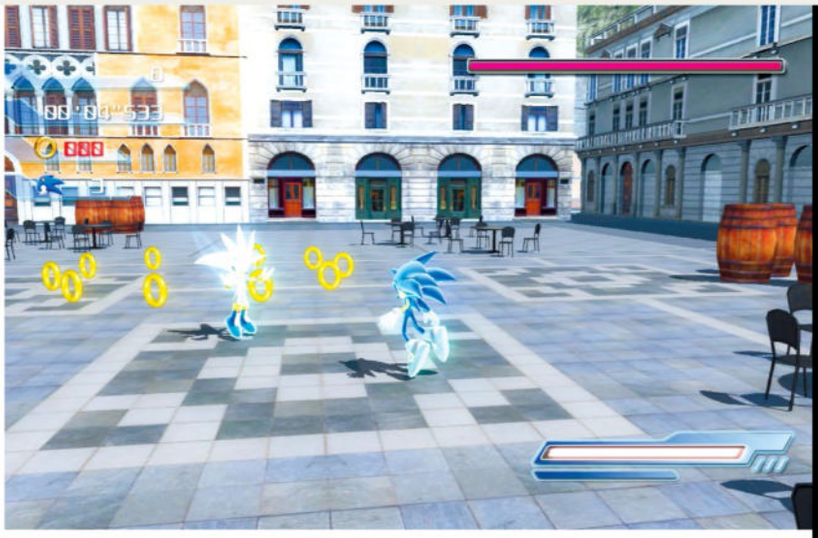
NICK
That's fair. I've got to admit I'm surprised though, your 6/10 score for *Sonic The Hedgehog* feels pretty lenient for a franchise you had no interest in.

DARRAN
I'll let you reply to that hot take, Tim. Did your review contain any bestiality jokes?

TIM
The 2006 one? That was awful. I really did not enjoy that. Dunno Darran, I never finished it so I didn't see *that* scene until later.

DARRAN
I found *Sonic* games to be really hit and miss during that period. *Generations* was a lot of fun and I liked *Secret Rings* and *The Black Knight* (or *Dark Knight* as I erroneously called it in my review) but we all know that the best 3D *Sonic* game is *Sonic All-Stars Racing Transformed*. Accept no substitutes.

NICK
Oh yeah, *Transformed* is fantastic. But you know what? I read a fan poll recently that had *Sonic Riders* above *Transformed*. It also had *Sonic Unleashed* in the top 10, and the original Mega Drive game didn't even crack the top 25. Based on that, I feel like maybe Sonic fans – and I'm including myself here – deserve exactly what we get.



» [Xbox 360] Tim never finished the 2006 *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Fair play, even Nick hasn't done *that*.

DARRAN
Wow, I wonder if people are just playing the new version of *Sonic Unleashed* on Xbox Series X and have forgotten what it was like to play originally? That's like when you watch those 'Greatest Ever' lists on TV and pretty much everything on it is newer stuff because most of the celebs obviously can't remember anything other than the most recent shows/sweets or whatever else is being covered.

TIM
It must be miserable being a Sonic fan, y'know with *Frontiers, Tails And The Music Maker*, the films… (*Mean Bean Machine* is great though.)

DARRAN
And the fans. Only joking, Nick.

NICK
The fans. Not joking.

» [Mega Drive] Dear young Sonic fans: this is not bad game design. Love, Nick.

» [Mega-CD] *Sonic CD*'s emphasis on exploration makes it divisive, but Darran really enjoyed it.

» [PS3] *Sonic Unleashed* is good, if you ignore roughly 60% of the game's actual content.

READERS REACT

Which game got you hooked on Sonic?

Martin Dewar
I go right back to the first *Sonic*. Saw a friend play it and it looked incredible. I got a Mega Drive not long after (which I still have) with *Sonic* packed in.

Megan Appleby
Sonic Advance as this was my very first Nintendo Game Boy Advance game I owned since I was nine or ten years old on release day, and I still play it to this day on my white Nintendo DS Lite. Just the fact I could take Sonic wherever and have a little Chao pet was cool!

June
Sega's love of re-releasing Mega Drive games to kingdom come means that despite growing up with a PS2 and DS, my entry point (still my favourite!) was somewhat anachronistically *Sonic 3 & Knuckles*, thanks to the likes of *Mega Collection Plus*.

Craig Taylor
Loved the original, but *Sonic 2* will always be my favourite. Was genuinely ill off school when it was released on Sonic 2sday, honest!

SonicFan#1
For me it was a pretty odd first encounter. My first *Sonic* game was *Sonic 2 Dash* for Java phones. Just seeing the speed of the game was magical for me at such a young age. After that were a couple more Java games including *Sonic Unleashed*. The spectacle just captivated me.

Luke Middleham
The original *Sonic The Hedgehog*. I got that, a Mega Drive and a portable colour TV for my room on one fantastic Christmas day. That's what started my journey as a gamer.

Blake Haslehurst
I love *Sonic* games but one game that got me hooked was *Sonic Adventure DX*, because not only do you get to play as Sonic but numerous other characters as well, the levels in the game were great fun too.

Frank Eivind Rundholt
I played the first *Sonic The Hedgehog* game on Master System. It's a very good platformer. Though it differs from the 16-bit version 'everyone' played, I think the graphics, music and gameplay are very good on Sega's 8-bitter. It gave me enough action and exploration to have many great hours of gameplay.

Didy Bebert
Sonic 2. Like American movie sequels: better, bigger, louder, longer.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

SUPER MARIO BROS 3
"What child of the Eighties would not have this as one of their favourite games?"
AMOUNT PAID: £5

RED GAME GEAR
"This was gifted to me by a relative because I recapped their rare Game Gear for them"
AMOUNT PAID: GIFT

PARODIUS
"We loved to play this as children and both had it on the SNES, but as adults we have discovered that it's far superior on the PlayStation"
AMOUNT PAID: £90

BIO

NAME:
Dean and Sharon Gear

LOCATION:
Berkshire

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
£50,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Super Nintendo

FAVOURITE GAME:
TMNT: Turtles In Time

TIKTOK:
@retrogameseeker

AN EYE FOR A BARGAIN

The Gear's collection is worth £50K but it didn't cost that much

For collectors of retro games, nostalgia tends to be a primary motivation. But if anything equals the fuzzy feeling of finding something that evokes fond memories of the past then we reckon it's the thrill of coming across a bargain – something Dean Gear certainly agrees with. He's been collecting for more than ten years along with his wife, Sharon. "Our reasoning was to replace the collection of games and consoles we had as children," he explains. "And I would say the special part of the collection is that 80 percent of it is charity shop and car boot sale finds."

Dean and Sharon have devised a winning system. When collecting, they've tended to earmark bundles rather than individual games and consoles. "Most purchases have been made from the profits we get from selling off doubles and making trades," Dean explains. As a result, the pair have been able to create a rather impressive games room.

"We started out with one bookcase in the dining room as we didn't really use it," Dean says. "It didn't take long for the collection to grow so we moved it into the living room to gain more space, and that's what you see today."

Since it occupies the main room of the house, it's a very well-organised and perfectly displayed collection – an undoubted talking point for visitors to their home. Indeed, one look at the photos show consoles spanning the generations (some of them boxed or placed in a display case) as well as shelves stacked with Sega Master System, Mega Drive and Nintendo GameCube titles. What's more, they've been delighting TikTok viewers in recent times too.

"During lockdown our Instagram was doing well so we thought we'd give TikTok a try to show my journey but we never thought in our wildest dreams that it would do so well," Dean says, pointing readers to @retrogameseeker. "Our original goal was to gain 10,000 followers in one year, but we made it to 100,000 in that time."

Those viewers will no doubt have been impressed, not least with one section – the large number of PlayStation titles the couple own. "The original PlayStation forms the biggest part of our collection with more than 330 games and multiple consoles," Dean says. "But I'm most proud that people assume this collection cost a lot of money rather than as a consequence of finding big bundles, keeping what I needed and selling the rest."

Even so, there's still an element of skill involved. Dean and Sharon constantly assess their collection and make sure the items they keep are the best they can be. "We look for bundles that include items we are looking for, then check the condition of the excess games and consoles against the games we already have to ensure our collection is always in the best condition," Dean explains.

But that's not to say it remains an easy task today. "We don't find as many bargains as we used to, but we do still find the odd one which keeps us motivated," Dean laments. "As such, we would suggest new collectors either start with their current interests or games they were nostalgic about as a child and build from there."

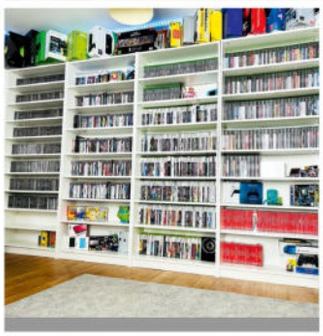
Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

ICE BLUE NINTENDO 64

"I bought this Nintendo 64 console from eBay for spares and repairs. All it needed was a new power supply!"

AMOUNT PAID: £120



JEWEL IN THE CROWN

ATARI JAGUAR

■ "It was a Shpock find and it was boxed with four games (*Aliens Vs Predator*, *Doom*, *Dino Dudes* and *Cybermorph*, all complete in box)."

AMOUNT PAID: £60

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

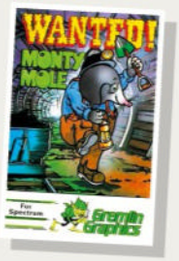
THE COVER STAR

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

Grabbing a copy of this gem of a game on the Mega Drive won't leave you in a spin because you can generally expect to pay between **£25** and **£40.** At those prices, you should perhaps ignore loose carts although they can be had for a tenner.

THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

If you want to grab this epic, innovative fantasy videogame on the ZX Spectrum, you won't have to go into battle with your bank manager. You can pick up a copy with the keyboard overlay for about **£5.**



WANTED! MONTY MOLE

If you want to enjoy Monty's first adventure on the ZX Spectrum you won't have to dig too deep. You'll typically find it for under **£10.**

SYSTEM SHOCK

Opt for a complete big box version of this first-person PC adventure from 1994 and you will need to shell out about **£80** or so. A near-mint version has been known to fetch double.

XENO CRISIS

Your best option is to grab it directly from Bitmap Bureau for **£66.** You can get it slightly cheaper second hand, but watch out for reproductions. Alternatively, buy an official ROM for **£18.**

ROBOCOP 3

Although unboxed Amiga versions of Ocean's game can sell for about **£6** there's no reason not to grab a full big box copy given they generally sell for **£20.** It's even less for a Hit Squad re-release.

NIGHTMARE CREATURES

If you want to relive the memories of Kalisto Entertainment's 1997 survival horror on the PlayStation, you shouldn't have nightmares getting hold of one. Expect to pay around **£30** for it.

MIDNIGHT CLUB: STREET RACING

Rockstar's racer pulled up on the PlayStation 2 in 2000 and there are loads of copies around. The black label version sells for about **£13** whereas Platinum re-releases sell for as low as **£2.**

HOW MUCH?!

GLOBE TROTTER

This rare adventure game for the Amstrad CPC 6128 (which few may have heard of) sold for **£773.32** on eBay recently. It was originally released in France in 1986 by Excalibur and spanned both sides of two 3-inch disks.

Prices correct at time of print

A DREAM FROM NIGHTMARES

Retro Gamer freelancer Graeme Mason tells us about his new book, ZX Nightmares

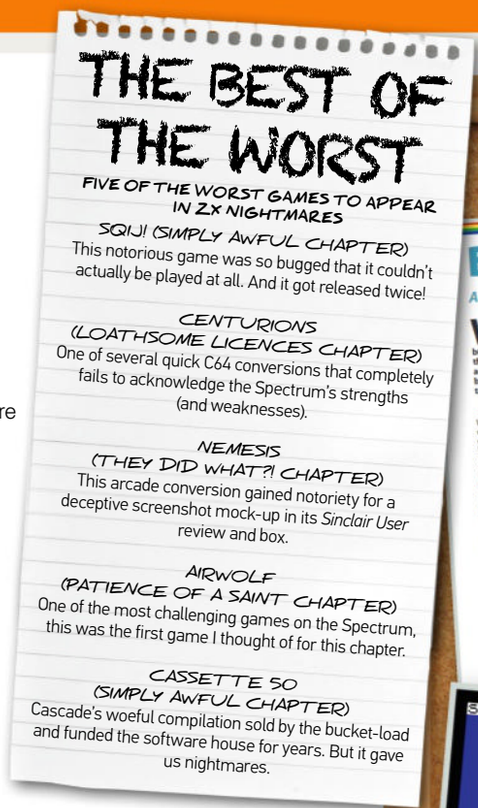
My favourite Spectrum mag was *Crash*. Its reviews were – at least initially – written by local school kids, roped in by its publisher Newsfield to play games and then write down their thoughts for a nominal fee. As a result, *Crash* tended to be more critical of the software submitted to the magazine; its reviewers were, after all, far too young to be schmoozed by PR departments or swayed by editorial and advertising concerns. These teenage gamers simply said what they thought, and each time a fresh issue of *Crash* arrived, I eagerly checked out the best of the best first: the Crash Smashes, those awesome games that scored 90% or above. These were the games you'd put on your birthday or Christmas list.

With that itch scratched it was on to the next set of reviews, those at the opposite end of the spectrum [groan – Ed]. Here was the dross of Speccy games, of which there were plenty. Hurried games, devoid of thorough playtesting or care; arcade licences that had zero chance of even remotely emulating the high-tech game they were supposedly based on; or cheap budget efforts that had to be released quickly, paving the way for game-breaking bugs (yes, I'm looking at you, *Sqij!*).

These reviews fascinated me, and *Crash* rarely held back. "A nasty steaming dollop of What," it withered against CRL's dismal arcade adventure, *Doctor What*. "Simply ill-executed rubbish," said one reviewer of the execrable *Kosmik Pirate*. "If you want a game in which you can hardly see your character, with trashy sound effects and boring gameplay, then rush out and buy *Centurions* today," said another reviewer of Reaktor's lamentable cartoon licence. It was all gloriously entertaining and, of course, I never risked one penny of my pocket money near the games in question.

That's not to say I don't sympathise with the people behind these games. As ever was and will be in the games industry, the pressure was often intolerable, and many developers back in the Eighties were barely out of their teens, the demands of an industry demanding its products as soon as possible no doubt proving something of a shock to the system. To a person, they all did a much better job than I could ever do. I didn't even have the patience to complete a magazine type-in program.

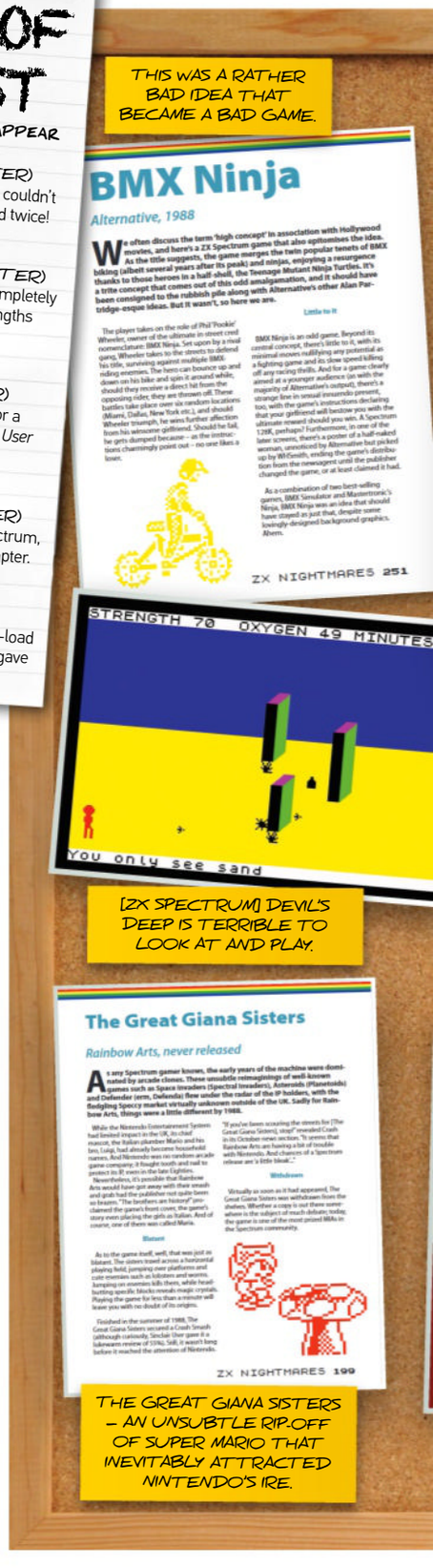
Then came COVID, lockdown and the sudden realisation that other people might actually have enjoyed reading about these terrible games, too. The idea of a book housing both awful original and licensed games began to ferment in my brain; once it solidified, and I started writing, I quickly realised that I had no desire to punish myself with playing 125 awful Spectrum games. In came the Patience Of A Saint chapter (charting a selection of Spectrum games that drove gamers to distraction) and a fourth section focussing on controversies, such as the *World Cup Carnival* debacle and Dinamic's dubious bullfighting simulator, *Ole Toro*.


THE BEST OF THE WORST
FIVE OF THE WORST GAMES TO APPEAR IN ZX NIGHTMARES
SQIJ! (SIMPLY AWFUL CHAPTER)
This notorious game was so bugged that it couldn't actually be played at all. And it got released twice!
CENTURIONS (LOATHSOME LICENCES CHAPTER)
One of several quick C64 conversions that completely fails to acknowledge the Spectrum's strengths (and weaknesses).
NEMESIS (THEY DID WHAT?! CHAPTER)
This arcade conversion gained notoriety for a deceptive screenshot mock-up in its *Sinclair User* review and box.
AIRWOLF (PATIENCE OF A SAINT CHAPTER)
One of the most challenging games on the Spectrum, this was the first game I thought of for this chapter.
CASSETTE 50 (SIMPLY AWFUL CHAPTER)
Cascade's woeful compilation sold by the bucket-load and funded the software house for years. But it gave us nightmares.

The idea took seed, and I had plenty of fertiliser thanks to the Spectrum's vast catalogue of games. I began writing *ZX Nightmares* over lockdown and finally completed the first draft earlier this year. With its exemplary record on Kickstarter and a reputation for professional, well-presented books, I was pleased to reach an agreement for Fusion Retro Books to publish *ZX Nightmares*, and with all the Kickstarter backer orders fulfilled, you can buy the book from the Fusion website, fusionretrobooks.com

Writing about over a hundred awful and awfully tough Spectrum games was not always fun and, quite appropriately, sometimes nightmare-inducing. Mastertronic's *Voyage To The Unknown*, a gameplay-free zone of a 'game', almost broke me. As did *Navy Moves*, Dinamic's ludicrously harrowing arcade adventure that bemusingly begins at the top of the difficulty curve before slipping down into calmer waters. And don't get me started on Cascade's *Cassette 50*. I never even got the free calculator watch.

So, if you buy *ZX Nightmares* (thank you!) and enjoy it, I'm sorry, but don't expect a follow-up in a similar vein. That's not to say there won't be another book – but maybe I'll get to play some games from my 1986 list to Father Christmas this time, OK? ✱


THIS WAS A RATHER BAD IDEA THAT BECAME A BAD GAME.
BMX Ninja
Alternative, 1988
ZX NIGHTMARES 251
STRENGTH 70 OXYGEN 49 MINUTES
You only see sand
[ZX SPECTRUM] DEVIL'S DEEP IS TERRIBLE TO LOOK AT AND PLAY.
The Great Giana Sisters
Rainbow Arts, never released
ZX NIGHTMARES 199
THE GREAT GIANA SISTERS – AN UNSUBTLE RIP-OFF OF SUPER MARIO THAT INEVITABLY ATTRACTED NINTENDO'S IRE.

For news on Graeme's books and more, you can follow him on Twitter (@wizwords) and Facebook (facebook.com/wizwords).

[ZX SPECTRUM] THAT DAMN REGENERATING WALL! A TRUE NIGHTMARE.
SCORE COPTERS BONUS
00000 5 03045
elite
ZX NIGHTMARES
Celebrating the hopeless, the hardest, and the controversial ZX Spectrum games that we loved to hate
By Graeme Mason
[ZX SPECTRUM] OCEAN'S HIGHLANDER WAS INEVITABLY A SWORD-BASED FIGHTER – AND NOT A VERY GOOD ONE.
HIGHLANDER
BARBARIAN
The Ultimate Warrior
FREE POSTER INSIDE
SPECTRUM 48K
THE FURORE OVER PALACE SOFTWARE'S USE OF A PAGE 3 MODEL IN IT'S ADVERTISING GUARANTEED BARBARIAN A PLACE IN THE THEY DID WHAT?! CHAPTER.
AN EXCELLENT GAME ON THE C64, WOEFUL ON THE SPECCY.
CYBERUN
124 ZX NIGHTMARES
16 ZX NIGHTMARES
ROMANCE, PREHISTORIC STYLE, IN BC BILL.
B.C. Bill
Imagine, 1984
6 ZX NIGHTMARES
ZX NIGHTMARES 7
A HANDFUL OF ULTIMATE GAMES APPEAR IN THE PATIENCE OF A SAINT CHAPTER.

FURTHER RETRO READING

Retro Gamer readers reveal their favourite books dedicated to retrogaming

Chris Jowett
I loved *Retro Tea Breaks Vol. 1* by Neil Thomas (RMC Retro) as it gives an insight into the early days of gaming development.

Jason
Bitmap Books' incredible *Amiga Visual Compendium*. It brings me back to my childhood just flicking through the images and seeing those games.

Dan
Hey! Listen! A Journey Through The Golden Age Of Videogames by Steve McNeil was a really good, and hilarious, read.

Ross
Van Burnham's *Supercade* was way ahead of its time and inspired many visual books that followed.

Mat Fox
The Game Console by Evan Amos. A good pictorial of so many old machines and also little teardowns to show you what's under the bonnet.

Retro Game Den
I'm a big fan of Nineties and early Noughties era FPS games, so *I'm Too Young To Die* from Bitmap Books is basically essential reading for me. It covers some of the precursors to the genre and every significant FPS game you can think of from 1992 to 2002.

David Sheppard
The GamesMaster Oral History. The show was groundbreaking, and without it, I don't think I'd be working in the industry now. A fantastic behind-the-scenes look at the show.

MAILBAG

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WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of one of our classic retro books. Good luck everyone!

TOAPLAN IS TOPS

Hi **Retro Gamer**,

Your Toaplan piece in your excellent *OutRun 2* issue really got me thinking about this company, and its place in gaming history. You see, when I was going to school in the Eighties, and diving into the arcade at lunch or afternoons, *Slap Fight*, *Flying Shark*, *Truxton*, *Hellfire* etc were my games of choice. And tell me of an arcade company that has made such an impact on a console like the one Toaplan made on the Mega Drive? I would love to hear your opinion. And its place in gaming history? Up there at the very top with Taito, Sega, Konami etc. It deserves no less. Keep up the good work,

John Ebbs, Dublin

» [Arcade] John feels Toaplan made some exceptional shmups and it's hard to argue with him.

We're glad you enjoyed the Toaplan article, John. The developer made some excellent games on Sega's console, and Darran agrees with you that it set a high bar for the system.

MEMORY WIPE

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

Can you please try and identify this game for me? I remember playing it in an arcade during the early Nineties (I think) and would love to play it again. I can't remember what it was called, but there were three games to choose from, including a shooting game and a side-scrolling platformer like *Shinobi*. You could also choose from a puzzle game, but I didn't really enjoy that one. I have images of really weird-looking stars and moons in my head and would love it if you can jog my memory.

Kind regards,

David Black

» [PC] Save yourself a couple of hundred pounds by buying *Three Wonders* on *Capcom Arcade 2nd Stadium* rather than a Saturn.

Thanks for writing to us, David. We're pretty confident we know the answer to this. The game you're looking for is called *Three Wonders* and it features *Midnight Wanderers*, *Chariot* (which has the distinctive-looking stars and moons you mentioned) and the puzzle game *Don't Pull*. The Saturn and PlayStation versions are prohibitively expensive, but it's available on contemporary systems via *Capcom Arcade 2nd Stadium*.

IT'S A KIND OF MAGIC

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

Would you consider running a feature on the history of *Magic: The Gathering* games? There have been some interesting versions of the popular card game over the years and it would be great if you could speak to the developers about them. I'd love to learn why they thought *Magic: The Gathering – Battlegrounds* was a good idea and how the *Duels Of The Planeswalkers* digital releases came about.

Kind regards,

Andrew Stone

Darran and Nick are both fans of *Magic: The Gathering*, and Darran still plays *Magic: The Gathering – Arena* on a daily basis. We have run an article on MicroProse's *Magic* game in issue 144, so seek that out while we investigate the series further.

» [PC] *Magic: The Gathering* is just a very convoluted game of Snap.

STAR LETTER

EXPLORING MALAYSIA

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

Greetings from Malaysia. I travel a lot within Malaysia and one of my hobbies during travelling is finding old arcade games in various places. You would be surprised about the many hidden gems you can find here. A lot of old Japanese video arcade games from the Nineties are shipped here and installed in malls and cinemas for visitors. We do have modern arcade games here, however, they are expensive to purchase for business owners and most of the old malls provide vintage used arcade games from Japan. Malaysian adults and kids enjoy playing them and you don't have to visit special arcade museums to play retro games. It is just common here. You can play rare and old arcade games by Sega like *OutRunners*, *Virtua Cop*, *Virtual On*, *Daytona*, *Initial D* as well Namco's *Time Crisis 1* and *2*, *Golgo 13*, etc. There are a lot of Nineties Neo Geo arcade cabs as well with *Soccer 98*, *The King Of Fighters* and *Bubble Bobble* in Kuala Lumpur. The price is usually 0.20 to 0.40 Euros per credit. Every mall has unique arcades and you never know what you can find. That's amazing, right?

Best regards,

Nikita Shigov

» Here's a selection of the games Nikita has discovered while exploring Malaysia.

You're right Nikita, that is amazing. The team have often gone on holiday and found classic arcade games tucked away in bars and hotels, so we can imagine your excitement about finding them. Thanks for the pictures you sent us. You clearly have some great games to choose from. Let us know where you currently are on your travels and we'll see if it's possible to get a book sent there.

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Email: retrogamer@futurenet.com

» Daniel really enjoyed discovering Sega's game in Blackpool.

LATE TO THE PARTY

Hello **Retro Gamer**,

Thank you for the great article on *OutRun 2* – it bought back some really good memories (and helped clear up what's up with all the different versions it had). I've actually been late to the party: the first time I experienced the game was five years ago in Blackpool, where they had a beautiful cabinet. I hope they still have it! And if not, the Pinball Museum in Budapest also has an *OutRun 2 SP* cabinet, albeit a weirdly barebones one with no seating. Maybe you'll write about *Sega Rally* next?

All the best,

Daniel Kis-Nagy

We're glad you enjoyed the *OutRun 2* article, Daniel. It seems to have gone down very well and it's nice to know it's still picking up newer fans. As for *Sega Rally*, Nick actually wrote an extensive piece on it back in issue 152 so see if you can track it down.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Couch gamers

Nick decided to take a holiday to Bournemouth so he could catch up with friends and do some CD shopping. He caught up with Darran one evening and they had a fantastic time playing through *Xeno Crisis* on N64 and the latest *Double Dragon* game, which you'll find reviewed this very issue.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Gremlin Graphics game?

» [MSX] Peter has fond memories of playing Footballer Of The Year.

Clint Elwyn Thomas
Normality: I loved it back in the day. It was the first fully interactive first-person perspective game I ever played as a teenager and I loved the weird and wonderful characters. It's one of a few games I replay once a year for a Nineties nostalgia fix.

Ian Hamilton
Auf Wiedersehen Monty, without a doubt. Fun gameplay and one of the best tunes on the Speccy.

Martin
SNES *Top Gear*. Fantastic game with brilliant music and four varied cars. I beat it again last year.

Retro Bowl
Footballer Of The Year. A huge inspiration for *New Star Soccer*.

Velvet Thunder
Lotus III: The Final Challenge. Full-screen sprite-based racing at its finest.

Vinny Mainolfi
It's got to be *Thing On A Spring* (hence my avatar). Such a gorgeous-looking platformer that's incredibly challenging, fun and innovative in style.

F1Racing
K240. I played it on my Amiga. It's a superb space strategy game and vastly underrated. I encourage everyone to try it. A superb game!

Tate19redux
Actua Soccer was superb but it has to be *Lotus Esprit Turbo Challenge*. It was my favourite car at the time and a quality racer too, I'd spend many an hour on that game. It even had pit stops.

Peter
I had an MSX, so the choice was limited, but *Footballer Of The Year* despite not caring about football, or *Jack The Nipper*. Addictive gameplay and reasonable graphics for the time!

Chris Fletcher
I loved *Harlequin* on the Amiga but my god it was hard. Amazing music that I can still recall today and it looked really gorgeous.

frodo
Monty Mole, because it was one of the first games I bought for my C64.

Tristan Cooper
Lotus Esprit Turbo Challenge on the Amstrad. I remember trying to see over the top of the hills as you drove up them.

Eddie
Venom Strikes Back. I wasted many hours of my young life on this.

retro GAMER

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Prince Of Persia Classic

NOT QUITE THE CLASSIC I REMEMBER

» RETROREVIVAL

» XBOX 360 » 2007 » GAMELOFT

It's funny how your opinion can change over time. When I first reviewed *Prince Of Persia Classic* in issue 40's round-up of Xbox Live Arcade games, I couldn't speak highly enough of it and went so far as to call it "the best-looking game on Live Arcade". I praised the new moves that had been implemented and its "beautifully paced gameplay", but I'm wondering now if I was perhaps a little overzealous in my appraisal of Gameloft's game.

I've been playing it again recently, and while there's no denying that it's entertaining, it's not quite the brilliant slice of platforming action that I once suggested it was. Don't get me wrong, the core level design is every bit as good as it was back in the Eighties, but the prince's new movement doesn't quite tie in and it's all too easy to plummet to an unintentional death or jump past a required platform if you're not careful.

Other aspects of the prince's movement like the ability to backflip or speedily jump off walls are far more useful and will certainly assist speedrunners. Likewise, the combat is a lot easier than I remember due to how simple parrying is. I raced through the first four stages of the game, and it was the loose controls and not the battles against guards and skeletons that would end up hampering me.

Fortunately, *Prince Of Persia Classic* is easily accessible thanks to backwards compatibility on new Xboxes, and while it's not without its flaws, it's still an entertaining take on the 1989 original, particularly when you add in the quality-of-life improvements and some cool extras like being able to race against a ghost of your best time. In a way though, it does feel quite nice to reflect back on a game that I once reviewed in the same magazine some 16 years previously. There's not many that get the opportunity to do that.

ENDGAME

SUPER BASES LOADED

» We at **Retro Gamer** want to shed light on the creation of your favourite games and let you get to know the people who made them. But we're always playing catch-up, and there are always more stories to tell. Jaleco's staff didn't feel the need to wait, and left messages in the credits of *Super Bases Loaded* – let's see what they said...

01

» When we hear 'designer' we usually think they worked on game design, but in Japan it's usually a job title for artists. HG confirms his role here, letting us know that he worked on the game's animation.

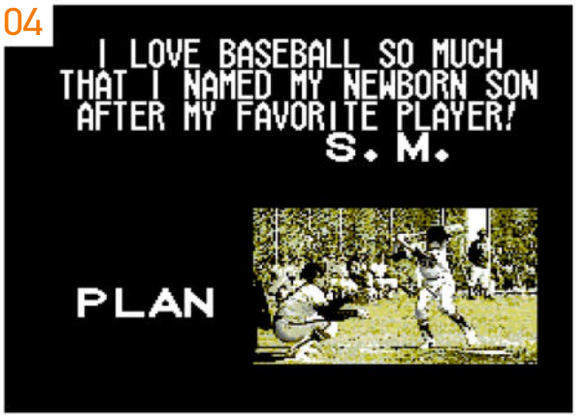
02

» The musician Tatsuya admits that while he worked on a baseball game, he's not actually much of a player himself. He certainly would have had the chance to find out, since baseball is massive in Japan.

03

» Take-A just wants you to buy some more Jaleco games, and that's understandable. Incidentally, these digitised photos are quite a nice addition, but we wish we could see them in their original quality.

04



» Planner S M is clearly a bit of a baseball fanatic, having named his son after his favourite player. We actually remember a mum-to-be winning over an unsure dad by pointing out that her preferred baby name could be shortened to sound like the football team he supports.

05

» We end on a lovely action shot. But while we're here, let's ponder something – there's no context to the other photos, and at least one looks like a kid playing. Do you think they may actually be some of the developers playing baseball in their youth? That would be nice.

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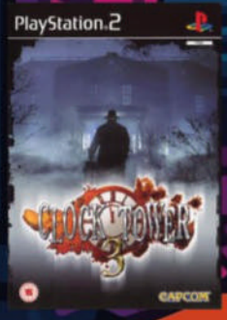

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